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**MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA**

## **THESIS**

**RUMORS IN IRAQ:  
A GUIDE TO WINNING HEARTS AND MINDS**

by

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September 2004

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**RUMORS IN IRAQ:  
A GUIDE TO WINNING HEARTS AND MINDS**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis proposes the study of rumor as a guide to the battle for hearts and minds in Iraq. It reviews existing rumor theory to identify how rumors function and what we can learn from them. Rumors often serve as a window into a community, and can provide valuable information for developing a campaign to assess, monitor, and gain the support necessary to defeat insurgents. This thesis employs two distinct typologies to analyze over ten months of rumors in Baghdad, Iraq. The motivation typology provides indications of Iraqi sentiment, and suggests unrelieved anxiety and fear is likely contributing to widespread hostility towards the US-led Coalition. Indications of unrealistic expectations are also evident, potentially contributing to hostility levels as they go unrealized. The subject typology identifies overarching concerns of the Iraqi people, and suggests there are specific fears inhibiting cooperation with US counterinsurgency efforts. This thesis then examines rumor remedies. Because they rely on effective communication skills, American and Arab cultural communication styles are contrasted and integrated into tailored remedies for Iraq. The findings in this thesis could assist Coalition information campaigns by alerting them to existing Iraqi perceptions so they can tailor messages to address significant concerns and fears.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

It is time to start winning wars vice battles - winning hearts and minds vice temporary respite. With that we will win the peace.

- Dave Dilegge, *Urban Operations Journal*

A successful insurgency, as we have seen in Iraq, requires the active support of a comparative few, and acquiescence from the rest of the population. Decades of Saddam Hussein's brutal rule have taught Iraqis that the best way to survive is not to take sides. The majority of Iraqis resent the occupation by the United States and its partners, making them even less likely to actively oppose the insurgents and cooperate with Coalition forces. (Metz 2004) Yet counterinsurgency strategy seeks to achieve exactly that—"winning the hearts and minds" of a population.<sup>1</sup> It does not require the Iraqi people to 'like' Americans, rather that they recognize the advantages of cooperating with the Coalition and against the resistance. Our current efforts to win Iraqi hearts and minds appear at best to be uncoordinated and haphazard, and at worst counterproductive. Many Iraqis perceive the Americans as using excessive force and see the occupation as little improvement over a dictatorship, as described by Ghazi Ajil al-Yawar, deputy chief of one of the largest Sunni tribes in Iraq and member of the American-appointed Governing Council:

The United States is using excessive power. They round up people in a very humiliating way, by putting bags over their faces in front of their families. In our society, this is like rape. The Americans are using collective punishment by jailing relatives. What is the difference from Saddam? They are demolishing houses now. They say they want to teach a lesson to the people. But when Timothy McVeigh was convicted in the bombing in Oklahoma City, was his family's home destroyed? You cannot win the hearts and minds of the people by using force. What's the difference between dictatorship and what's happening now? (Maass 2004)

It is vital to understand Iraqi perceptions, as perception is key to efforts to win hearts and minds. If US perceptions of the problems and attitudes of a local population are incorrect, then any solutions devised to fix those problems would also be incorrect.

---

<sup>1</sup> The British first coined this term after World War II to describe efforts to put down insurgents in their former colonies, but the concept has been around much longer. (Hayden 2003)

Conversely, regardless of the sincerity of intent or expended effort, if our actions are perceived to be adverse to the beliefs, needs, interest, or desires of the local populace, they will not lend their support. Despite the recognition that winning hearts and minds is a critical aspect of a successful counterinsurgency, many military planners approach it as an afterthought, if at all. This is likely due, at least in part, to the inherent difficulties in determining what the primary concerns and fears are that prevent a populace from cooperating against insurgents, accurately assessing their perceptions of our efforts to reduce those concerns, and the further complication of measuring our own effectiveness. We learned the hard lesson in Vietnam that hearts and minds won cannot be measured by counting tons of bombs dropped or the number of enemy killed. Although similar methods are still attempted, such as counting the megawatts of power produced in Iraq, the US has also turned to public opinion polls to gauge our progress, but these are expensive, difficult measurements to make with their own built-in biases and limitations.<sup>2</sup>

This thesis proposes an alternative way to guide and measure effectiveness of the battle for hearts and minds: the study of rumor. It is often rumor that attributes incorrect causes and motivations, fuels misperceptions, and escalates conflicts. By tapping into the abundant reservoir of circulating rumors in Iraq, we can determine the underlying fears, anxieties, and sentiment of the people and use that information to develop a more successful campaign to assess, monitor, and win their support. A key mechanism for looking into the hearts and minds of Iraqis was developed by Bill Putnam, chief of *The Baghdad Mosquito*, an open source intelligence (OSINT) report produced by the MNF-I/III Corps Analysis and Control Element (ACE). In addition to providing a daily summary of local and regional media stories, the small staff of American intelligence analysts, linguists and Iraqis meet to identify and discuss the latest circulating rumors and publish them in the weekly feature, “What’s the Word on the Streets of Baghdad?” This data is distributed to US personnel in Iraq as well as officials in Washington, DC. Although the rumor mill has become a “cult favorite,” there are no known institutionalized efforts to process it in a way to meaningfully aid counterinsurgency

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<sup>2</sup> There have only been four major scientific polls conducted in Iraq/Baghdad between Aug 03 and Jun 04 by Zogby, ABC, and Gallup. Each poll had a slightly different focus, and variations in how similar questions and answers were phrased makes it difficult to conduct long term trend analysis of Iraqi public opinion.



strategy.<sup>3</sup> Putnam and his staff have taken an important first step in tracking rumors in Baghdad and providing a window into what the average Iraqi opinion is and why they think and accept the things they do. Although public affairs, information operations and psychological operations all require this insight in order to be truly effective in disseminating US intentions and shaping the Iraqi perspective, there is no central, hierarchical mechanism to tie these efforts together. Furthermore, aside from institutional knowledge that is regularly rotated out of theater, there is no repository for identifying and analyzing trends in rumor activity. There are occasional ad hoc efforts toward countering specific rumors, primarily if commanders feel operational repercussions such as rioting may result, but most day-to-day rumors are often laughed at and dismissed as entertainment.<sup>4</sup> Are rumors just the silly musings of unsophisticated Iraqis, or do they have widespread influence over perceptions and actions? What can we learn from rumors and why are they so pervasive in the Middle East? Can the US fuse the insights gained from rumor into more effective communication strategies aimed at winning hearts and minds, and if so, how? Finally, is it even possible or worthwhile to combat rumors, or must we accept their prevalence as a fact of life in Iraq?

This thesis develops a typology of rumor and prescriptions of possible remedy. The thesis argues that although the function and transmission of rumor operates similarly across cultures, the communication mechanisms to counter rumor must be tailored to the particular cultural context in which they operate. In other words, although the psychology of rumor is more or less universal, the information or psychological operations remedy is not.

#### **A. WHAT IS RUMOR?**

Rumors are unconfirmed news in widespread circulation. They differ from gossip—typically idle talk that occurs only to entertain or establish social mores—in that rumors have an element of urgency to them. (Rosnow 1988) They arise and spread when people are uncertain and anxious about a subject they deem important, and the rumor appears to offer a viable explanation. (Bordia and DiFonzo n.d.) When desired

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<sup>3</sup> Putnam, Bill. E-mail to the author. 20 Aug 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Lang, LTC John., USMC and CPT Shannon Greene, USMC, I MEF, G2. Personal interview, 19 Aug 2004.

information is withheld, unavailable or distrusted, rumors are likely to increase, for rumors help people make sense of the world.

Rumors—also known in the Middle East as whispering campaigns and the “souk-telegraph”—are often “as effective as radio broadcasts” in spreading their message. (Sharabi 1966) They are typically spread by word of mouth, but as technology advances so does the ability to transmit rumors. Today, rumors are found not only on the street, but also on the Internet, in newspapers, and on the radio and TV. While many news outlets try to maintain high standards of journalistic integrity and actively avoid promulgating rumors, the occasional unverified story slips by. Some news agencies, particularly in the Middle East, have little experience and training in Western ideals of independent journalism and have been slow to implement the associated strict reporting standards, resulting in frequent coverage of rumors. While transmission by these sources can certainly lend credibility to rumors, they would undoubtedly continue to flourish without any assistance until the underlying conditions that prompted the rumors improve. Those conditions can vary, but rumors thrive in times of uncertainty or social distress, like during war or natural disasters, or when access to credible information is lacking, such as in the predominantly state-controlled atmosphere of the Middle East.

## **B. WHY IS RUMOR SIGNIFICANT?**

Rumors should not be dismissed as simply idle or malicious talk—they are a valuable tool that sheds light on the mind-set of a community. Rumors can alert officials to potential violence or conflict, provide a mechanism for measuring public opinion, and even expose enemy propaganda efforts.

Rumor and conflict go hand in hand—much of history can be regarded as the reactions of people to rumor. (Allport and Postman 1947a) Throughout the Middle Ages, for example, rumors of miracles, divine commands, and immense treasure spurred the crusades and other religious wars. While wars are certainly an extreme example, rumors can lead to violence at all levels. By examining transmission, or who is talking to whom, rumors can provide insight into the structure of the community and tap into the pulse of different groups, alerting officials to growing cleavages or possible inter-group violence in local communities. In November 2003, for instance, rumors spread that Hindu militants had killed a Muslim builder in Ahmedabad, India, the sight of deadly

religious riots the year before. Violent clashes soon followed, resulting in nine deaths, including an attack on a motorcyclist who was set on fire along with his vehicle. It turned out the builder had been killed, but by a member of his own Muslim community.<sup>5</sup>

Rumors almost always precede riots and other acts of group aggression, providing a window of opportunity for officials to thwart it or at least prepare a response. In early October 2003, rumors that stipend pay for former Iraqi soldiers would be cut off resulted in rioting in both Baghdad and Basra, leaving two Iraqis dead, dozens injured, and several businesses burned down.<sup>6</sup> On a much larger scale, in 1979, a rumor spread through the markets in the old Pakistani city of Rawalpindi that Americans or Israelis had seized the Kaaba in Mecca, the central shrine of Islam. The rumor ignited emotions that were already high due to the assault on the US Embassy in Iran three weeks earlier. Tens of thousands of Pakistanis rushed to the US compound in the nearby capital of Islamabad, destroyed the wall outside the embassy brick by brick, and ransacked the offices. Four people were killed, including a Marine guard, before the protesters were subdued by Pakistani army troops.<sup>7</sup>

Rumors also provide a means for measuring public opinion—a task central to winning hearts and minds. Public opinion is the temporary and fluctuating attitudes and beliefs that result from collective efforts to interpret constantly emerging situations. (Peterson and Gist 1951) Using rumors to gauge and influence the mood on the street is an ancient practice. Rome appointed public rumor wardens, called *delatores*, who mingled with the population and reported what they heard to the palace. The Romans considered this a good barometer of public sentiment and often used the *delatores* to launch their own counteroffensive rumors. (Allport and Postman 1947a) Most infamously, when half of Rome was burned in a fire in 64 C.E., Emperor Nero instigated a rumor claiming the Christians had started it in order to divert unfavorable attention away from himself, resulting in the first persecution of the Christians. (Columbia Encyclopedia, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., s.v. “Nero”) There are even some hints that after World War II,

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5 “Eight shot dead, one burned to death in clashes in India,” *Manila Times*, 11 Nov 2003.

6 Associated Press, “Stone throwing Ex-Soldiers Confront Troops,” *Houston Chronicle*, 4 Oct 2003.

7 Rone Tempest and Tyler Marshall, “Pakistan’s Riot History Gives the U.S. Pause,” *Los Angeles Times*, 10 Oct 2001.

despite the Soviet government's monopoly on information in the USSR, it occasionally planted rumors it wanted circulated and used them as one of its few resources for sounding public opinion. (Bauer and Gleicher 1953)

Assessing foreign public opinion, especially in the culturally distinct Middle East, is a relatively sporadic and difficult task for Westerners. Most efforts rely on polls, which can provide objective measurements if representative samples are selected and culture is considered when wording and conducting the polls, but they often only offer a snapshot of current sentiment. Rumors, on the other hand, both express and form public opinion. They are unlikely to take hold unless they are perceived as plausible, and the more a specific rumor is heard the more currency it gains, shifting the orientation of public thinking and ultimately steering opinion. For example, in Iraq there is a recognized 'Circle of Information' in which people hear rumors, which they pass on to their friends and family, who tell their friends and family and so on until the story returns to the original source. Slight differences in the returning rumors lead them to believe it is a different story, validating and reinforcing their original thoughts and feelings. (Baghdad Mosquito 2004)

Furthermore, while pollsters predetermine issues to discuss, rumors reflect opinion spontaneously, arising naturally out of the public's interests. They also bypass resistances and defenses that may inhibit people from answering polls honestly. Individuals answering polls may feel internal pressure to answer questions in a certain way, possibly due to national, ethnic or religious loyalties or fear, which may skew the results. Immediately after 9/11, for example, few Americans would make unfavorable comments about President Bush, earning him an extraordinary 88% approval rating—his highest ever. This was up from just 52% the month before, a rating he slowly, but consistently returned to by February 2003. (Harris Poll 2003) Ultimately, rumors can offer a glimpse of the deeper structure of public opinion—the rationalizations and projections upon which opinion is based—not just the end results seen in polls. (Knapp 1944)

Finally, rumor is an ideal tool of the propagandist to influence morale, especially in times of war or conflict. For example, on 28 June 2004, the Editor-in-Chief of the

Iraqi newspaper Addustour reported, “The antagonists in Iraq are trying to use rumors to undermine the relationship between the Iraqi people and the new government.”<sup>8</sup> Rumor not only offers wide and rapid dissemination, but it also disguises its source, enabling it to influence relationships or fuel doubts while bypassing the inherent skepticism that accompanies messages from the ‘enemy’—a feat most standard psychological operations or propaganda attempts are unable to accomplish. “If leaflets, newspapers, or radio broadcasts are likened to bullets, then rumor must be likened to a torpedo; for once launched, it travels of its own power.” (Knapp 1944, 28) The US government recognized the destructiveness of stateside rumors during World War II, and actively sought to monitor and control them. They established the Office of Facts and Figures, the Office of War Information, and even devoted portions of Presidential radio addresses to issue information and produce publications as ‘antidotes’ to rumor. These offices conducted undercover investigations to pursue sources of particularly malicious rumors. Private rumor clinics, often consisting of recurring magazine or newspaper articles, were also implemented to refute rumors. (Allport and Postman 1947a) Whether planted or naturally occurring, keeping tabs on circulating rumors is imperative if propaganda operations are to be detected and effective counteractions initiated.

Overall, there are numerous ways rumor serves as a window into the inner workings and perceptions a community. Even Saddam Hussein recognized the power and value of rumor. During his reign he received daily reports detailing the most prevalent rumors and political jokes. His security services monitored and collected them while his intelligence services fabricated and spread them. According to Maan Izzat, a former editor in the Ministry of Information, “Saddam was there because he knew what the Iraqi people were thinking.” Rumors were his way of keeping his finger on the pulse of the people, and knowing when to get tough.<sup>9</sup>

### **C. ORGANIZATION**

The thesis focuses on the case study of Iraq because the on-going insurgency is the most pressing illustration of the US’ need to win hearts and minds, and exposes the serious repercussions if we fail to do so. Iraqis have long employed rumor as a credible

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<sup>8</sup> Baghdad Mosquito Early Edition, 28 Jun 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Slackman, “Rumors Trigger Discontent in Iraq,” *Los Angeles Times*, 6 Jun 2003.

information source and reflection of the mood on the street, suggesting that naturally occurring, readily available rumors are an ideal guide in the battle for hearts and minds in this conflict. The supply of data makes this case particularly attractive, with close to one thousand rumors reported by the *Baghdad Mosquito* from 3 October 2003 through 13 August 2004, the timeframe examined in this study. This thesis is both policy-relevant and of interest in social science more generally. The next chapter reviews existing rumor theory, developed primarily in the West, and demonstrates how the majority of these concepts are also valid in the Middle East. Chapter three applies this theory to actual rumors circulating in Baghdad, Iraq, in order to ascertain the underlying fears and concerns of the population. Overarching themes and issues are identified, which should be addressed by Coalition information campaigns. Chapter four examines rumor remedies, or how to prevent or control rumors, which rely primarily on effective communication skills. This chapter looks at the differences between American and Arab cultural communication styles and uses that information to adapt Western rumor remedies for use in Iraq. The last chapter summarizes the overall findings of this thesis and offers policy prescriptions for institutionalizing rumor processing to ensure public affairs, information operations and psychological operations efforts benefit from the insight rumors provide in the battle for Iraqi hearts and minds.

## II. PSYCHOLOGY OF RUMOR

While rumors have been monitored and manipulated by states and individuals for thousands of years, the scientific study of rumor began in just the last century. This chapter reviews current rumor theory in order to explain why rumors occur and how they develop and spread. It also presents several options for analyzing rumors, and examines the type of information that can be learned from their study. Although rumor research has focused predominantly on Western audiences, those studies that have been conducted in other societies indicate much of the foundational theory discussed in this chapter is applicable to other cultures, including those in the Middle East. (Bauer and Gleicher 1953; Nkpa 1977; Piff 1998; Prasad 1935, 1950; Shibutani 1966; Turner 1994) The significant cultural differences that require some departure from this literature occur primarily when dealing with rumor remedies, and are addressed in chapter four.

Gordon Allport and Leo Postman introduced the study of rumor into mainstream psychology in their seminal work, *The Psychology of Rumor* (1947). (Bordia and DiFonzo n.d.) They argued that rumors serve a complex purpose: they relieve emotional urges to ‘slap at what one hates,’ while rationalizing and justifying why one feels the way they do about a situation, ultimately serving as a catharsis to relieve the tension of uncertainty. Based on their research and that of others before them, Allport and Postman created the Basic Law of Rumor<sup>10</sup>, in which they identified two conditions necessary for rumor to thrive: importance and ambiguity. The law states that “the amount of rumor in circulation will vary with the importance of the subject to the individuals concerned *times* the ambiguity of the evidence pertaining to the topic at issue.” (Allport and Postman 1947b, 502) The idea that humans have a desire to know their circumstances and that rumors offer explanation when information is lacking, remains at the heart of most current theories of rumor, although there have been considerable additions to this body of knowledge. (Rosnow 2001)

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<sup>10</sup> The Basic Law of Rumor is a formula, depicted as  $(R \sim i \times a)$ , where ‘R’ is the amount of rumor in circulation, ‘i’ is the relative importance of the rumor subject, and ‘a’ is the ambiguity of evidence pertaining to the subject. Note that the relationship between importance and ambiguity is multiplicative indicating that if either is zero there is no rumor.

Most significantly has been the recognition that an emotional component was missing from the basic law of rumor. Interestingly, Jamuna Prasad proposed as early as 1935 that rumors occur when uncommon and unfamiliar situations take place that cause emotional disturbances, such as anxiety and uncertainty, which influence how people respond to the situation. Studying rumors circulating after a devastating earthquake in Northern India, Prasad said anxiety was a necessary condition for rumors to spread, noting that rumors subsided as people regained their emotional stability. (Bordia and DiFonzo 2002) Although Allport and Postman did not incorporate his findings in their basic law, later rumor researchers, most notably Ralph Rosnow, revisited this concept and ultimately devised four conditions that affect and possibly even predict rumor generation and transmission.

## **A. CONDITIONS FOR RUMOR**

### **1. Uncertainty**

Rosnow uses the term uncertainty in place of Allport and Postman's ambiguity, to define "a belief or intellectual state produced by doubt, such as when events are unstable, capricious, or problematical." Uncertainty exists when people do not understand, for whatever reason, what current events mean or what future events are likely to occur. This psychological state can result when the public believes information is being withheld, often due to censorship or lack of attention by authorities. This can have such a significant impact that low levels of trust in information sources are thought to lead to increased rumor transmission even when other conditions are not present. (DiFonzo, Bordia, and Winterkorn 2003) Furthermore, when trust is high and there is no doubt or confusion, there is no rumor. (Rosnow 2001) Rumors typically flourish when uncertainty is widespread in a group or community, serving as a collective problem-solving process to relieve intellectual pressure or tension by attributing meaning to the environment.

The Middle East is often called the land of rumors and conspiracy theories, with stories ranging from the antics of a sports team to international plots to take over the world spreading like wildfire. Perhaps the foremost cause is the endemic uncertainty resulting from the tight grip the region's authoritarian regimes have historically maintained over the media. Until the relatively recent advent of the Internet and



independent satellite television in the 1990s, individuals had little access to uncensored information. People in the region have become so accustomed to hearing propaganda from state-sponsored news outlets that they are never quite sure what to believe, except they know not to believe what the government tells them. (Farmaian 1992) Thus, rumor has long served to explain current affairs and predict future events.

## **2. Outcome-Relevant Involvement**

The second condition proposed by Rosnow is outcome-relevant involvement, a reconceptualization of Allport and Postman's variable of importance. Although a scientific definition of importance was never provided, it likely referred to the relevance of a situation and whether a person really cared about the outcome, based on Allport and Postman's example, "An American citizen is not likely to spread rumors concerning the market price for camels in Afghanistan because the subject has no importance for him." (Allport and Postman 1947b, 502) Prasad also argued that in order for rumors to exist, they must be of collective interest or importance, suggesting that rumors are essentially a social phenomenon. If a group had no interest in a topic or situation, there would be no rumors about it. (Bordia and DiFonzo 2002) Several studies have been conducted to determine the relationship between outcome-relevant involvement and rumormongering, or the spread of rumors, but so far there have been no definitive findings correlating the two. Some results do seem to contradict Allport and Postman's basic law, suggesting people are more likely to spread rumors when outcome-relevant involvement is low rather than high, possibly because they are less likely to examine those rumors critically. A complex relationship certainly exists, with many researchers seeming to agree for now that outcome-relevant involvement is a moderator variable—affecting the extent to which people contemplate what they do or say, but not necessarily in a set pattern. (Rosnow 2001)

Based on this condition, it is not surprising that many rumors in the Middle East, particularly in urban areas, concern government or international conspiracies. The people in the region have long witnessed the intrusiveness and control of regimes over their lives, as well as the frequent interference of neighboring countries in their affairs. This has resulted in populations that have become sharply attuned to political developments that may ultimately affect their existence.

### **3. Anxiety**

Rosnow added the condition of anxiety to those necessary for rumor generation and transmission. This is the emotional component many researchers felt was missing from the basic law of rumor. Anxiety refers to “an effective state that is produced by, or associated with, apprehension about an impending, potentially disappointing outcome.” (Rosnow 2001) While uncertainty often produces rumors to relieve the *intellectual* pressure people feel, anxiety leads to rumors as a way to express or relieve *emotional* tensions caused by anticipation. Even though research has shown that rumors do not always erase anxieties and may even contribute to them, other studies indicate that the more stressful or fearful a situation, the more likely it is to produce rumors. (Rosnow 1991) Finally, anxiety and uncertainty, while separate variables, are often linked together; as uncertainty increases, so does anxiety and vice versa. This condition helps explain why wars, natural disasters, or an individual’s lack of control inherent in living under an authoritarian regime all witness dramatic increases in rumor generation.

### **4. Credulity**

The final condition that affects rumor is credulity, or trust, which refers to whether the teller finds the rumor plausible or believable. Generally speaking, people do not start or pass rumors they find untrustworthy because they have a vested interest in preserving their own credibility. (Rosnow 2001) Therefore, it is often thought that all rumors start with at least a kernel of truth; however, that kernel can become so misshapen that it becomes unrecognizable. It should be noted that people are not as likely to scrutinize the plausibility of rumors when they are extremely anxious, which often results in more farfetched tales. Repetition of rumors, as previously discussed in regards to the Iraqi ‘Circle of Information,’ can also foster credulity.

While most Westerners who hear many of the rumors floating around the Middle East quickly dismiss them as preposterous, many Middle Easterners—even the very well educated—often accept them as fact. (Pipes 1996) One reason Middle Easterners may seem more susceptible to believing the stories and conspiracies rumors report is because they occasionally prove true. One of the more notable examples is the Lavon Affair, in which Pinhas Lavon, the Israeli Defense Minister in 1954, plotted to stop the Anglo-Egyptian agreement for withdrawal of troops from bases in the Suez Canal zone. Lavon

believed that if British troops left, the Egyptian military could penetrate the Sinai Peninsula and potentially threaten Israel's existence. Working with the head of Israeli Intelligence, he arranged for an Israeli spy ring in Cairo to plant bombs at the American and British embassies and other buildings frequented by Westerners. The attacks would be attributed to the Muslim Brotherhood and were intended to create doubt about President Nasser's ability to protect foreigners, ultimately resulting in a British decision to keep troops in Egypt. The plan was exposed, however, when members of the spy ring were caught and brought to trial. (Smith 2001)

Other examples of actual conspiracies include the Sykes-Picot agreement and Balfour Declaration during World War One. In Sykes-Picot, the British and French governments drew up a secret treaty dividing most of the Middle East between them before the war was even over. This violated British assurances given to Sharif Hussein for an independent Arab state if the Arabs revolted against the Ottoman Empire. The Balfour Declaration, a British pledge to support a Jewish settlement in Palestine, also violated territory promises to Sharif Hussein. (Cleveland 2000)

The United States has participated in its fair share of conspiracies in the Middle East. In 1953, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) sent agents to Tehran to assist Iranian officers in organizing the coup against Prime Minister Mosaddiq, facilitating the return of the shah and his royal dictatorship. (Cleveland 2000) Just a few years later, in 1956, the CIA was again involved in planning a coup—this time in Syria. The revolt never took place due to friction among the participants, timing of the Suez invasion, and possibly early detection by Syrian intelligence. Undeterred, the CIA financed another coup the next year but their plans were discovered, resulting in three members of the American embassy linked to the plot being expelled from the country. (Smith 2001) A more recent example of a US conspiracy is the Iran-Contra affair, which concerned two secret Reagan Administration policies in the mid-1980s. The Iran operation involved efforts to obtain the release of Americans held hostage in the Middle East through the sale of US weapons to Iran, despite an embargo on such sales. Some of the money from these sales was diverted to secretly support contra military and paramilitary activities in Nicaragua, even though Congress prohibited this support. (Walsh 1993) This small sampling of actual conspiracies, and the rumors that undoubtedly accompanied them,

offer historical precedent as to why Middle Easterners are often more willing to believe rumors that appear farfetched to Westerners.

## **B. CONTENT & CLASSIFICATION OF RUMORS**

While it is important to understand the conditions under which rumor occurs, it is the analysis of rumor content, or what specific rumors are about, that can provide insight into the attitudes, concerns, and anxieties of groups within a population. Prasad emphasized social influences, such as group norms, interpersonal relationships, and shared belief systems or culture, when discussing rumor content. He posited that rumors are typically exaggerations of the fears and concerns of the group sharing the experience; when people are faced with crisis situations they dig into their storehouse of cultural, religious, and mythical knowledge to try and find meaning, reduce uncertainty and relieve anxiety. (Bordia and DiFonzo 2002)

Within these bounds, rumors often address specific concerns, such as why electricity is so problematic in Baghdad or when schools in Iraq will reopen. Many also include social or cultural stereotypes, usually making distinctions between in-groups (those the teller identifies with) and out-groups (those the teller is not a member of) with the identity of the victim and the perpetrator frequently changing roles depending on who is telling the rumor. This practice can be explained by social identity theory, developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in 1979, which proposes that members of a group are motivated to see themselves as relatively better than other groups. (Krauss and Chiu 1998) Rumors often help foster this positive self-image by attributing negative characteristics to out-groups, or blaming them for destructive events that affect the entire community. As a result, rumors often intensify divisions between ethnic groups or religious communities. For example, in October 2003, it was rumored in Iraq that the Sunnis believed US forces were planting improvised explosive devices in the streets at night so they could find them the next day and look good. The Shi'a, on the other hand, believed it was the Sunnis who were planting the devices. No group wanted to believe members of their own community could be responsible for the deadly devices that were killing more Iraqis than Americans.

Sometimes, the specific message in a rumor is of little consequence, but the tone or type of rumor can still prove to be a valuable descriptive tool. The content of rumors

was examined in depth by several researchers during World War II, including a very influential study by Robert Knapp that illustrated this concept. (Knapp 1944) Analyzing over a thousand rumors sent to Reader's Digest from across the United States in September 1942, Knapp developed a three-fold classification system. He found the majority of rumors could be classified as wish, fear, or hostility rumors. Wish rumors are those that express hope or desire, such as rumors in Iraq in March 2004 that the US was going to provide generators for each neighborhood in Baghdad, or the rumor that many US soldiers were converting to Islam. Fear rumors are derived from anxiety and panic and can include tales of atrocities or other dreadful events. A common fear rumor in Iraq is that lists of Iraqis working for or cooperating with the Coalition are hanging in mosques or in the possession of resistance groups, suggesting those individuals will be targeted for attacks. Another prevalent fear rumor is that criminals are dressing in Iraqi police uniforms and setting up checkpoints to rob and kill unsuspecting victims. Not only does this rumor invoke fear, but it also encourages distrust of the Iraqi police at legal checkpoints, magnifying anxieties about the general security environment. Finally, there are hostility, or wedge-driving rumors, whose essential motivation is aggression or hatred. Many of these rumors are ultimately directed towards out-groups, or allies of the population through which the rumor is traveling, not the enemy. Hostility rumors are often attempts to create scapegoats due to the inherent frustrations and deprivations of war—since the enemy is already publicly blamed for the war, there would be little emotional satisfaction in blaming them further. Numerous hostility rumors have circulated in Iraq about the Kurds, for example. They are being accused of taking down Iraqi flags in the North and putting up their own, fueling the belief that the Kurds want their own separate state. Kurdish Peshmerga forces are rumored to have helped the US fight the Sunnis in Fallujah. There have even been rumors that the Israeli Mossad is funding Kurdish supermarkets in Baghdad, implying a relationship exists between the Kurds and Zionists. Overall, Knapp found a striking concentration on just a few themes. Half of all the WWII rumors were anti-Administration, anti-British, or anti-Jewish. Furthermore, over two thirds fell in the hostility category. Knapp believed that his classification system and findings provided insight into important social problems like

low morale and negative public opinion, and could be used as a benchmark against which later rumor samples could be compared.

While many researchers have adopted Knapp's categories, particularly wish and fear rumors, there is no single or preferred classification system. Rumor subjects are sometimes also used, such as in DiFonzo et al.'s study of organizational rumors, in which five types of rumors were identified: turnover, pecking order, job-security, costly-error, and consumer-concern rumors. (DiFonzo, Bordia, and Rosnow 1994) The population or circumstances surrounding rumors, and the information one hopes to gain from their study, often provides the best indication of what type of classification system to use.

### **C. RUMOR TRANSMISSION**

Much research attention has been focused on how and why rumors spread. Allport and Gordon concluded that as rumor travels, it tends to grow more concise and easily told because what is seen or heard must be simplified in order to remember it. They based these findings on numerous classroom experiments in which college students passed on a communication using a serial transmission chain—similar to the childhood game of 'telephone.' Allport and Postman observed distortions and eliminations in the message as the students showed a tendency to eliminate (or level) and sharpen certain details in efforts to remember and pass on the overall meaning. The result was the initial messages, which contained approximately twenty details, were reduced to about five. (Rosnow 1991) Subsequent researchers recognized, however, that this is not the way rumors actually behave. They often do the opposite, snowballing and becoming more elaborate the more they are told.

H. Taylor Buckner proposed in 1965 that there are actually two different kinds of rumor patterns: a chain, in which rumors travel from person to person in a serial manner like that proposed by Allport and Postman, and a network, in which many people hear a rumor from more than one source. (Buckner 1965) Both types of patterns occur in every community, but groups are often predisposed towards one or the other based on their structure. Buckner identified two basic types of groups. Diffuse groups are usually rather large, are spread out geographically, and have limitations—either imposed or freely chosen—on interpersonal interactions. An American nuclear family is often part of a diffuse group; its members are not likely to interact frequently with a large number

of mutually acquainted individuals or have many common interests. Like Allport and Postman's model, they are more likely to hear rumors only once over serial chains, resulting in a rapid decline in rumor content and accuracy. Close groups, on the other hand, are those that have continuous contact among members, with little or no difficulty in any member seeing any other member. Small towns, military units, or cliques are examples of close groups. They do not have to be stable or long-term associations; a crowd or mob can become a close group during a natural disaster or riot. Rumors typically circulate through close groups over multiple networks, with people hearing the information several times and from several sources, stemming any decline in rumor content. Although diffuse groups certainly exist in Iraq, close groups better represent the large extended families, neighborhoods, and religious and ethnic groups Iraqis tend to associate with. Furthermore, Iraq is a traditionally oral society, which means story telling is a valued and practiced art. Transmitting rumors is a group experience, filled with emotion and intuitive insights, and rumors are likely to be repeated several times as additional members join the discussion. While Buckner's work demonstrated why rumors do not always experience leveling and sharpening, it still did not explain why rumors often grow in complexity.

Some of the latest research in this area, conducted by Prashant Bordia and Nicholas DiFonzo, answered this question by demonstrating that rumor transmission is not just the passive retelling of a story. (Bordia and DiFonzo 2004) It is actually a rich conversation that involves the mutual exchange of ideas, opinions, and viewpoints, with people providing additional evidence to persuade others to believe or disbelieve rumors. They found that conversations about rumors typically follow a four-stage interaction process. In the first stage, the rumor is tentatively introduced to the audience and reactions and questions are exchanged. In the second stage, additional information or related personal experiences are shared in efforts to determine the veracity of the rumor. The third stage is dominated by sense making, during which the group evaluates the rumor and the associated information, often embellishing it in the process. Finally, in the last stage the group loses interest in the rumor and the conversation turns to other issues. The point of all this is that rumor transmission does not typically occur over an

undifferentiated chain or consist of merely passing on information, but is an interactive, social process, filled with questions and repetition, that usually leads to rumor embellishment and personalization.

### **1. Motivations for Transmitting Rumors**

Although rumor transmission is a social process, individual motivations can provide further insight into why rumors are spread and how people respond to them. Bordia and DiFonzo identified three psychological motivations underlying rumor transmission based on the goals of social interchange: fact-finding, relationship-building, and self-enhancement. (Bordia and DiFonzo n.d.) They found that all three motivations operate in any given situation, but one or two will often be more dominant. To the extent that transmitting a rumor satisfies one or more of these motivations, it will likely spread.

#### ***a. Fact-Finding***

The fact-finding motivation is closely aligned with the rumor theory already discussed. The conditions of uncertainty and anxiety lead individuals to try and make sense of their environment, and rumors serve as a means to inform, educate or forewarn, often acting as collective warnings so people can take appropriate actions. While rumors motivated by fact-finding are at risk for not being critically evaluated if anxiety levels are too high, when anxiety levels are moderate these rumors are more likely to be accurate.

#### ***b. Relationship-Building***

Individuals transmit rumors during social encounters, sometimes as a way to further their own relationship goals. Information is the currency of power and influence, and rumors are often used as such. They provide opportunities to grab attention, appear “in the know,” highlight status differences, and manipulate who is “in” or “out” by making references understandable to only some in the audience. The type of relationship being fostered—a long-term affiliation or a brief encounter at a party—can influence whether or not a rumor is transmitted as well as its accuracy. In short-term encounters, rumors may simply serve as a means to entertain or break the ice with accuracy not being that important. When dealing with long-term relationships, however, the rumor teller is more likely to only transmit rumors they believe, because they will



want to maintain their credibility. They are also less likely to transmit negative rumors than positive ones, unless talking to close friends or the information provided can help avert a harmful situation.

*c. Self-Enhancement*

The last motivation identified by Bordia and DiFonzo is self-enhancement, and refers to individuals' need to feel positive about themselves. Going back to social identity theory, people derive their identity from the groups they belong to (in-groups), and want to see these groups as better than out-groups. Individuals judge the accuracy of rumors based on their existing worldviews; positive rumors about in-groups and negative rumors about out-groups are not likely to be closely evaluated because they justify existing beliefs. Rumors that contradict these worldviews, even if highly probable, are likely to be dismissed. As a result, rumors motivated by self-enhancement are the least conducive to accuracy, yet can often have the most damaging effects such as instigating hostile reactions or inter-group conflict.

Overall, the rumor theory presented in this chapter suggests that rumor is a consequence of environment, events, and group structure, not culture. Assertions that Arabs, or any other culture, are more prone to rumors should be carefully weighed against the presence of the conditions for rumor, and will undoubtedly fail to stack up. Some cultures, including many in the Middle East, may be more efficient at rumor transmission because their societies are generally organized around larger close groups, but efficiency does not equal proclivity. There is no doubt, however, that rumors are prevalent in Iraq. This is most likely due to their long history of authoritarian rule, the US-led occupation, and their uncertain future. The next chapter examines the circulating rumors in Iraq, applying the foundational theory just reviewed, in an effort to determine underlying concerns and fears of the population that may be inhibiting cooperation in US counterinsurgency efforts.

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### III. IRAQ CASE STUDY

This chapter applies the rumor theory presented in chapter two to actual rumors circulating in Baghdad, Iraq. Rumors were analyzed and categorized in an effort to discern primary concerns and sentiments of the Iraqi people. Several themes emerged suggesting areas the Coalition could focus public affairs, information operations and psychological operations efforts on to more effectively win Iraqi hearts and minds.

#### A. METHODOLOGY

##### 1. Data Acquisition

All rumors analyzed in this thesis were collected from the weekly feature, “What’s the Word on the Streets of Baghdad,” published in the *Baghdad Mosquito* by MNF I/III Corps ACE – OSINT. A total of 966 rumors were collected, starting with the first publication of this feature on 3 October 2003, and running through the 13 August 2004 edition.<sup>11</sup>

Once a week Bill Putnam, chief of the *Baghdad Mosquito*, sat down with his Iraqi employees to discuss the latest circulating rumors and atmospherics in Baghdad. The Iraqi staff is representative of the population in Baghdad, including Arab Sunnis and Shi’as, Kurds, and Turkmen. Members of this group, consisting of both men and women, also come from different areas and classes of the city, reducing the likelihood of a single viewpoint dominating the rumors. Most reported rumors are published, except “the outlandish or things that have no real effect.”<sup>12</sup> According to Mr. Putnam, there is no reticence on behalf of the Iraqis to report negative rumors about the US nor other Iraqi groups represented in the meeting, allowing us to infer the reported rumors are accurate, uncensored portrayals of the existing word on the street.<sup>13</sup>

##### 2. Content Analysis

Each rumor was categorized using two different typologies.<sup>14</sup> The first typology identifies rumor motivation and contains Knapp’s categories of fear, wish, and hostility.

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<sup>11</sup> Data was cut off on 13 Aug 03 in order to complete this thesis. *The Baghdad Mosquito* continues to publish its weekly rumor mill.

<sup>12</sup> Putnam, Bill. E-mail to the author. 19 May 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Putnam, Bill. E-mail to the author. 20 Aug 2004.

<sup>14</sup> See Table 1 and Table 3 for summaries of the typologies used.

(Knapp 1944) Rumors were classified in the fear category if they reported or predicted atrocities, dreaded events, or fearsome behavior, such as a rumor that university students unhappy with their final exams were killing their professors. Wish rumors expressed hope or forecasted desired outcomes and events, like a rumor predicting a new census would be conducted by the end of the year, suggesting elections could be held soon after. Rumors were placed in the hostility category if their primary motivation was aggression or hatred towards another group, or an attempt to create a scapegoat. A common hostility rumor is that the US withholds electricity to punish the Iraqi people. Some rumors had more than one motivation, such as conveying both fear of an event and hostility towards an out-group. In these cases, the dominant motivation was selected. For instance, the rumor that the US plans to turn over all its bases and the Green Zone to the Jews when it leaves could be classified in both the hostility and fear category, but because hostility is the dominant motivation, it was classified as a hostility rumor. I also included a fourth category of curiosity rumors in this typology, to classify reports of obvious opinions and what Allport and Postman referred to as “pseudo-news”—information passed on with no value judgments or apparent sentiment. (Allport and Postman 1947a) For example, a rumor that people in the back of a white pickup truck conducted a mortar attack against the Green Zone appears to be motivated solely by fact-finding, not emotion, and was therefore classified in the curiosity category.

The target of each rumor was also tracked (if one existed), with ten primary targets identified. These include anti-US/Coalition, anti-Iraqi Administration, anti-Saddam/Ba’athist, anti-Kurd, anti-Shi’a, anti-Sunni, anti-Iran, anti-Foreign Arab, anti-Zionist, and anti-Terrorist/Insurgent. Rumors were considered to be targeted if the antagonist of the rumor was identified, either explicitly or by making references that could be attributed to a specific group. For instance, an explicitly anti-Iran rumor reported the Iranians had declared an unofficial war on the US and were using Iraq as their battlefield. A less obvious, but still targeted anti-Sunni rumor suggested that the majority of kidnappings of foreigners occurred in Sunni areas. All the targeted rumors fell in the hostility and fear categories with one exception—a report that Saddam has cancer and may die in a year's time. This anti-Saddam rumor was classified in the wish category.

The second typology placed rumors into one of eight overarching subjects: Government/Political, Quality of Life, Insurgency, Security, Terrorism, Military, Communication, and Detainees. These subjects were selected based on preliminary examinations of the rumors, as well as areas I expected to find a significant number of rumors pertaining to, such as detainee rumors in light of the Abu Ghuraib prisoner abuse scandal. Several of these subjects overlap, like security, terrorism, and insurgency, with many rumors arguably able to fall in more than one category. However, there are enough distinguishing characteristics within each subject to make separate categories worthwhile.

The Government/Political category contains rumors concerning the transfer of authority to the interim Iraqi government, including internal power struggles, election schedules, constitutional provisions, and government institutions. Rumors of corruption, patronization, and hidden loyalties in domestic politics, as well as international intrigues and plots regarding Iraq, are also included. Finally, concerns about sectarian strife were incorporated in this category because most dealt with fears of federalism, the creation of autonomous or separate states, and the possibility of civil war.

The Quality of Life category consists of rumors that convey or predict incidents that potentially affect Iraqis' daily or future survival. Rumors regarding reconstruction efforts (or lack thereof) and perceived US promises are included, as well as welfare issues such as the availability and safety of medicine, food, water, and utilities. This category also contains rumors of Iraqi resources being "stolen," such as oil, land, and even intellectuals (brain drain), and rumored restrictions on Iraqis' ability to travel or flee the country if the situation becomes unbearable, such as the difficulty obtaining passports.

The Insurgency category focuses on the Iraqi resistance, and threats of future attacks, demands, and calls for Jihad. Groups or individuals rumored to be providing support and funding to resistance organizations, as well as Coalition or Iraqi government responses to the insurgency, such as negotiations or military actions, are also included.

Security rumors refer to common crimes like murders, robberies, and kidnappings, as well as the ability of the Iraqi police to protect citizens. Border security and threats against individual Iraqis that collaborate with or assist the Coalition are also incorporated in this category.

The Terrorism category includes rumors about al-Qai'da, Abu Musab al Zarqawi, and other foreign fighters in Iraq not specifically linked to the resistance. Car bombs, suicide attacks, and large-scale attacks against Iraqi civilians are typically attributed to terrorists and are categorized here. Finally, this category contains rumors about the US' role and responsibility for terrorism in Iraq.

Military rumors primarily report US forces' behavior, such as being rude, stealing, bad driving, and indiscriminately targeting civilians. Also included are rumors about what role US forces would play after the transfer of authority, suggestions the US is lying about American casualty figures, and military employment of secret weapons.

Communication rumors concern television and news coverage, CDs, flyers, signs, and other messages distributed in Baghdad, as well as attempts to sabotage these messages. US efforts to communicate with Iraqis are incorporated here, with many rumors suggesting the US intentionally conceals or distorts information.

The final category is Detainee rumors, which contains rumors about Abu Ghuraib prison, interrogator qualifications and methods, and interrogation assistance from countries like Israel and Kuwait. Rumors about the type of Iraqis being held in prison, such as hardened criminals, Ba'athists, or even religious clerics, are included in this category.

To assess the reliability of coding schemes for both the motivation and subject typologies, I enlisted a second person, armed with detailed guidelines, to categorize a random sample of 50 rumors and compared our results. Coding consistency was 92% for the motivation typology, and 86% for the subject typology. Disagreements were discussed and resolved.

## **B. FINDINGS**

Findings based on each typology are presented along with significant themes and issues evident in this body of rumors.

## 1. Motivation Typology

Some rumor theorists, including Allport and Postman (1947b), have rightly critiqued the hostility/fear/wish typology as being oversimplified. They are correct that it is difficult, and sometimes impossible, to correlate a single emotion or motivation to any given rumor. However, this analysis of Iraqi rumors demonstrates the typology has merit as an indicator of community morale and public opinion. Table 1 shows the percent of hostility, fear, wish, and curiosity rumors, as well as the primary subjects of rumors in each of these categories. Interestingly, almost 70% of rumors fall in the hostility and fear categories. While there may be other factors contributing to this large number, the ongoing occupation and instability in Iraq likely play a significant role. The prevalence of these negative rumors suggest many Iraqis are experiencing high levels of anxiety and uncertainty, fueling widespread fear and anger that is undoubtedly influencing their perceptions and opinions of the Coalition. Additional insight into what those opinions are can be gained by looking at the rumor targets. (See Table 2.)

Table 1. Rumor Motivation Typology Results

MOTIVATION	DESCRIPTION	RESULTS (966 Total)	PRIMARY SUBJECT <sup>15</sup>
<b>Hostility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Wedge-driving, often directed towards out-groups</li> <li>– Aggression, hatred</li> <li>– Attempt to create scapegoats</li> </ul>	35.7%	Gov/Pol – 31.0% Q. of Life – 16.5% Insurgency – 15.4%
<b>Fear</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Derived from anxiety and panic</li> <li>– Relays atrocities, dreadful or undesired events</li> </ul>	33.7%	Security – 27.9% Gov/Pol – 24.8% Insurgency – 19.6%
<b>Curiosity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– “Pseudo-news,” opinions</li> <li>– No apparent motivation, target, sentiment</li> </ul>	21.5%	Gov/Pol – 25.5% Q. of Life – 23.1% Insurgency – 16.8%
<b>Wish</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Expresses hope, desire</li> <li>– Wishful thinking, optimistic</li> </ul>	9.0%	Q. of Life – 25.3% Terrorism – 19.5% Gov/Pol – 18.4% Security – 16.1%

<sup>15</sup> The Primary Subject column displays the subjects most often referred to in each motivation category. For example, 31.0% of all Hostility rumors concern Government/Political issues. Subjects containing less than 15% of rumors were not listed.

Table 2. Targeted Rumor Results

<b>RUMOR TARGET</b>	<b>RESULTS<sup>16</sup></b>	<b>HOSTILITY</b>	<b>FEAR</b>	<b>WISH</b>	<b>PRIMARY SUBJECT<sup>17</sup></b>
<b>Anti-US/Coalition</b>	208 / 21.5%	78.4%	21.6%		Gov/Pol – 27.4% Military – 23.1% Q. of Life – 21.2%
<b>Anti-Iraqi Admin.</b>	54 / 5.6%	66.7%	33.3%		Gov/Pol – 48.1% Security – 20.4% Q. of Life – 20.4%
<b>Anti-Saddam/Ba’athist</b>	34 / 3.5%	67.6%	29.4%	2.9%	Insurgency – 50.0% Gov/Pol – 32.4%
<b>Anti-Kurd</b>	33 / 3.4%	97.0%	3.0%		Gov/Pol – 72.7% Security – 18.2%
<b>Anti-Iran</b>	29 / 3.0%	65.5%	34.5%		Gov/Pol – 27.6% Insurgency – 24.1% Security – 17.4% Terrorism – 17.4%
<b>Anti-Shi’a</b>	28 / 2.9%	82.1%	17.9%		Insurgency – 42.9% Gov/Pol – 32.1% Security – 21.4%
<b>Anti-Zionist</b>	26 / 2.7%	88.5%	11.5%		Gov/Pol – 57.7%
<b>Anti-Terrorist/Insurgent</b>	21 / 2.2%	81.0%	19.0%		Terrorism – 57.1% Insurgency – 19.0%
<b>Anti-Foreign Arab</b>	20 / 2.1%	75.0%	25.0%		Terrorism – 30.0% Gov/Pol – 25.0% Insurgency – 25.0%
<b>Anti-Sunni</b>	14 / 1.4%	71.4%	28.6%		Insurgency – 64.3%

<sup>16</sup> 467 rumors (48.3%) were targeted towards the listed groups. 51.6% of reported rumors had no apparent target, or groups were only targeted a few times and did not warrant another category. The first number in the results column refers to how many rumors were actually targeted against each group, while the percentage indicates the percent of total rumors reported (966).

<sup>17</sup> The Primary Subject column displays the subjects most often referred to in each targeted category. For example, 27.4% of all Anti-US/Coalition rumors concern Government/Political issues. Subjects containing less than 15% of targeted rumors were not listed.



*a. Hostility*

The hostility and fear rumors in Iraq are almost evenly divided, with hostility rumors having just a slight edge. The fact that there are almost as many fear as hostility rumors is extremely telling when one considers the large number of sectarian divisions that exist. Groups have been played against one another for decades under Saddam, who exploited religious, ethnic, and tribal divisions to protect and reinforce his own power. By definition, hostility rumors drive wedges between groups, cast blame, and fuel anger and hatred. With discriminatory practices the norm in Iraq one would expect a much greater number of hostility rumors, much as Knapp found in his study of wartime rumors in the US.<sup>18 19</sup> (Knapp 1944) Knapp's hostility rumors were primarily targeted against the US administration and military, generally accusing both institutions of mismanaging the war or abusing power, although there were also a significant number of anti-British and anti-Semitic rumors. Over 94% of the hostility rumors in this study were targeted against one of the ten groups listed in Table 2.<sup>20</sup> Almost half the targeted rumors were anti-US/Coalition—over 20% of all reported rumors. At first glance, this may not seem so bad considering the US is occupying Iraq. However, when you compare the number of anti-US/Coalition rumors with those targeted against other groups, the numbers are more meaningful. The second largest targeted group is the new Iraqi Administration, which was only targeted in 5.6% of rumors. In this highly factional country, rumors targeted against specific ethnic and religious groups vary from 3.4% or less of the total rumors reported. The fact that there are almost seven times as many anti-US/Coalition rumors as there are anti-Kurd rumors, the most targeted ethnic group, indicates the extent to which the US is negatively perceived. While these results are not surprising, they highlight the need to account for and address Iraqis' negative perceptions of the US when crafting Coalition messages and evaluating Iraqi behavior.

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<sup>18</sup> Knapp's 1944 study found 65.9% hostility, 25.4% fear, 2% wish, and 6.7% miscellaneous (or curiosity) rumors.

<sup>19</sup> In this study, 25% (82) of fear rumors identified an antagonist and were therefore included in the targeted rumors, but their primary motivation was fear, not hostility. Knapp did not address this phenomenon in his study; it is impossible to determine if he experienced it, and if so, how he accounted for it. However, even if all the Iraqi targeted rumors were included in the hostility category, hostility rumors would still not be as dominant as in Knapp's findings.

<sup>20</sup> 5.8% (25) of hostility rumors were either targeted against groups that did not warrant another category, or the target was not readily apparent.

The majority of anti-US/Coalition rumors deal with government/political issues, the military, and quality of life concerns, and generally imply that the US is encouraging instability and hardship in Iraq in order to fulfill its own selfish goals. Examples include rumors that the US wants a female to be the Minister of Defense to insult the Iraqi people, or that a taxi driver saw five dead Americans floating in the Euphrates River. This rumor suggests the US is disposing of its bodies in the river to hide the number of casualties suffered. There are also rumors that the US's efforts to improve Iraq are only designed to help President Bush get reelected, and all of the promises will be forgotten after the election.

Anti-Iraqi Administration rumors focus primarily on government/political problems in Iraq, with many Iraqi officials and civil servants accused of being corrupt or self-serving, and failing to attend to security and quality of life concerns. For instance, the Taxation Office in Baghdad is rumored to be stealing people's money by claiming a tax is needed for reconstruction, but the money just goes into the employees' pockets. Anti-Saddam/Ba'athist rumors also deal with government/political issues, such as rumors that Saddam or members of his family are trying to return to power, but they primarily blame the Ba'athists for leading and funding much of the resistance.

Iraqi Kurds, Shi'as and Sunnis were the primary ascriptive groups targeted in this set of rumors. The majority of anti-Kurd rumors accused the Kurds of trying to dominate or break away from Iraq, with frequent rumors of preferential treatment from the US or collaboration with the Israelis fueling resentment and anger. Anti-Shi'a and Sunni rumors dealt primarily with the insurgency, blaming members of each group for resistance attacks and destabilizing Iraq. Although there are twice as many anti-Shi'a rumors as anti-Sunni, this may be attributed to two causes. First, the notoriety of Muqtadah al-Sadr and his Mahdi Army have fueled many rumors targeted towards the Shi'a in general. Second, many rumors about Sunni-led resistance movements referred to Saddam or the Ba'athists, and were therefore included in that category.

Rumors were also targeted against external groups, such as Iran and the Zionists. There has been deep-seated hostility between Iraq and Iran since the 1980s, when they waged the region's longest, costliest, and deadliest war of modern times.

Rumors accused Iran of interfering in practically everything—government, insurgency, terrorism, etc—in order to perpetuate instability and ensure the “Iraq experiment” is not successful. Israel is also rumored to be playing a large role in Iraq. Labeled anti-Zionist in order to include anti-Jewish rumors not specifically tied to Israel, this category is probably more prevalent in Iraq than these numbers illustrate. Israel is a hot-button issue throughout the Middle East, and hatred and suspicion is rampant due to the on-going Palestinian crisis and memories of the Arab-Israeli wars. The majority of anti-Zionist rumors accuse the Israelis of trying to stealthily take over Iraq, similar to what is occurring in the Palestinian territory. Rumors that Israelis are buying up properties and businesses, or that Iraqis will be issued passports similar to the Palestinians so when they travel Jewish settlers can come take over their houses, all seem to reinforce that some Iraqis are identifying their current situation with the plight of the Palestinians, and seeing themselves as victims.

Finally, there were several rumors targeted against terrorists/insurgents and foreign Arabs. Most of the rumors naturally blame these groups for the on-going violence, with many rumors accusing them of conducting attacks and participating in these movements for personal gain.

***b. Fear***

In addition to the low percentage of hostility rumors in Iraq compared to Knapp’s study, another interesting finding is the comparably high percentage of fear rumors. (Knapp had a 2.5:1 ratio of hostility to fear rumors, while this study found a 1:1 ratio.) Although variations in coding criteria between the two studies may play a role, this difference in hostility-to-fear ratios is likely the result of Iraqis actually living in a war zone, and therefore more likely to experience high levels of anxiety and panic, which are manifest in fear rumors. Most fear rumors in Iraq reflect the instability of the environment and predominantly address security concerns, government and political issues, and the insurgency. For example, there are rumors that Arab men from the Gulf States are kidnapping women in Baghdad and selling them—\$300 for a woman and \$500 for a virgin—with two girls already reportedly kidnapped. There have also been rumors that Saddam is negotiating with the US to return to power, and there are regular rumors forecasting resistance attacks in specific areas of Baghdad. In other words, most fear

rumors are concerned with events that may personally affect the lives of the Iraqis spreading them. The citizens in Knapp's study, on the other hand, were relatively safe in the United States during WWII and could afford to expend greater effort on "who is to blame," or hostility rumors. Fear rumors in his study were primarily concerned with military members or enemy actions, such as rumors of excessive casualties, spying activities, or sabotage. These fear rumors focused on the outcome of the war and the welfare of American soldiers, but they did not convey the fear of personal danger present in many of the Iraqi rumors. Although comparable large-community studies have not been conducted during times of peace, if one were performed I would expect the results to be closer to Knapp's findings with a greater percentage of hostility rumors over fear rumors.

*c. Curiosity*

However, I would expect the percentage of curiosity rumors, which are quite disparate between the two studies, to be comparable to the results found in Iraq. Although Knapp only found 6.7% curiosity (or as he labeled them, miscellaneous) rumors, I concur with Allport and Postman's assumption that they are probably more common than his findings portray. (Allport and Postman 1947a) Knapp's low number of curiosity rumors is likely due to the manner in which they were collected. In his study, individuals had to take the time to write rumors down and mail them in, decreasing the likelihood most people would expend that energy for a mere curiosity rumor. In the *Baghdad Mosquito* forum, however, much less effort is required to repeat the rumors one hears, contributing to over 20% of all reported rumors falling in the curiosity category. I suspect this is a more typical breakdown of rumor type. Knapp did not indicate the topics of his miscellaneous rumors, but in Iraq, curiosity rumors were primarily about government/politics, quality of life issues, and the insurgency. For instance, there was a rumored political fight between Alawi and Chalabi with both of their parties taking part in the battle; rumors that taxi prices have increased due to the gas shortage; and rumors that a very large cache of weapons was found in Fallujah. Although these rumors do not provide a great deal of insight into Iraqi morale, they are extremely valuable when examining rumor subjects and themes.

**d. Wish**

The last category is the wish rumor; I found over four times as many in Iraq as Knapp found in the US. Although there is an inclination to view this as a positive indicator, which it can be, caution should also be taken. Wish rumors are believed to be more prevalent when “victory is in sight,” and people begin looking expectantly towards the future. Knapp’s wish rumors, which included rumors of peace and triumphs over the enemy, were collected in 1942, long before we were close to winning the second world war, which could explain why only 2% of his rumors fell in the wish category. All of the Iraqi rumors were collected after the conventional fighting was over and the US-led occupation was somewhat established. Fear of what US forces would do once they reached Baghdad had likely subsided, allowing Iraqis to consider how their lives would change under a new regime, and contributing to the 9% of wish rumors in circulation. Many wish rumors addressed quality of life concerns, like the government was going to give away 5,000 apartments to poor Iraqis, or the US Embassy was hiring 3,000 laborers. Terrorism and security rumors were also prevalent, with reports the US had already captured Zarqawi, or that Prime Minister Alawi had personally shot five leaders of criminal gangs at one of Baghdad’s jails, suggesting the new Iraqi government was cracking down on crime. Finally many of the wish rumors pertained to government/political issues, such as the rumor that Iraqis in traditionally pro-Saddam areas are supporting the new interim government. Overall, wish rumors seem to be a good indicator of positive morale. There is a catch-22 to the wish rumor, however. While positive rumors reporting or predicting desired changes could certainly improve morale in the short term, they can also lead to increased expectations. If those expectations are regularly disappointed, then increased hostility and frustration are likely to result. Therefore, unrealistic wish rumors can be just as dangerous as hostility and fear rumors and should not be encouraged.

**2. Subject Typology**

The second typology breaks down the rumors by subject, and is depicted in Table 3. This typology successfully highlights specific Iraqi concerns, some of which were expected and others that are more surprising. There are far more issues in this body of rumors than can adequately be presented in the space of this thesis, so I have highlighted

the most dominant or significant themes of each category to discuss. Many of these concerns should be recognized and addressed by the Coalition, although this list should not be considered all-inclusive.

***a. Government/Political***

The Government/Political category contained over a quarter of all the reported rumors, more than any other group, which is not surprising since building a new regime is such a significant process. Three overriding themes emerged from these rumors, the first of which concerns the transfer of authority. There was a great deal of uncertainty and fear about what would happen after the transfer, with many expecting a repeat of the looting and violence that occurred after Baghdad first fell. There are also concerns about the legitimacy of the new Iraqi government since it was not elected. Many fear the new government will be as self-serving, corrupt and brutal as Saddam's regime and will allow high-level Ba'ath party members to return to power. This does not mean Iraqis did not want the transfer to take place, but they are obviously still anxious about how it will turn out.

The second theme in this category concerns international plots to control, interfere in, or harm Iraq. There are rumors of joint Zionist and US conspiracies to establish a Greater Israel, rumors of Iranian spies infiltrating both the resistance groups and the government to promote instability, and rumors that the US plans to wage wars against both Syria and Iran from Iraq. There are also rumors claiming that many Iraqis in the new government are nothing but US puppets, with one rumor even suggesting that seven of the new ministers are US citizens and members of the Republican Party. These rumors point to Iraqis deep distrust of their new government, their neighbors, and especially the US.

The final theme in the government/political category concerns sectarian issues. Numerous rumors claim the US wants and is encouraging sectarian strife and even a civil war as an excuse to stay in Iraq. The perception on the street is that the US unabashedly favors the Kurds, who will not hesitate to establish a separate state if they do not get enough power. With or without US encouragement, there appears to be significant fear that a civil war will occur. Iraqis are worried that even if elections are held, groups that do not "win" will not adhere to the new government and its laws, and

stability will never be achieved. Finally, there is a great deal of discussion that government employment is based increasingly on ascriptive identity or party membership. If this fear (or fact, as some argue) increases, it could lead to groups attempting bigger and more violent grabs for power in order to claim a stake in the new Iraq before it is too late, which could very well fuel inter-group violence or civil war.

***b. Quality of Life***

The quality of life category refers to issues that affect Iraqis' daily or future welfare. Three themes stand out. First, Iraqis are understandably concerned about their daily survival. In addition to rumors and countless complaints about fuel shortages and inadequate utilities (electricity, water, sewage), there are also rumors about contaminated food, water and medicine; humanitarian aid being sold or destroyed so it does not reach the people who need it; and rising prices along with low or unpaid salaries. Many Iraqis are also concerned their new currency is being forged; resulting in reluctance to accept it and possibly fear the money they have will become worthless. From all these complaints the idea that things were better under Saddam has emerged—he fixed shortages faster and prices were better. Unrealistic expectations most likely play a large part in this discontent, but that does not make these concerns any less real to the Iraqi people.

The next theme is the fleecing of Iraq. Many Iraqis are convinced the US is stealing their oil and gas, explaining the frequent shortages. There is even a rumor that the Japanese discovered precious metals in their area of operations and are stealing it instead of helping with the reconstruction. Jordan is refusing to return Iraqi bank deposits, US soldiers are buying up properties and businesses in Iraq, while foreigners are smuggling goods out of Iraq—even their palm trees and dates. Rich Iraqis are leaving the country and scientists are being killed, causing a brain drain. Overall, there appears to be a significant concern that at the end of the day there will be nothing left in Iraq for the Iraqis.

There are two competing ideas in the final quality of life theme—the character of Iraq. The first idea is that the US-led occupation is corrupting the country. Rumors of prostitution rings operating within the Green Zone, hotels becoming “whorehouses of parties with alcohol,” and even one rumor claiming US forces will turn

a local mosque into an amusement park all point to this fear. At the other end of the spectrum, however, is the concern that Iraq is becoming too Islamized. Harassment of unveiled and western-dressed women is reportedly increasing, claims that Islamist parties have established “Islamic Police” and are intimidating university professors into relinquishing class time to them, and rumors that new Islamic laws will be soon be passed indicate fear of turning into a radical Islamic state. Iraq has long been a secular state, albeit with Islamic trimmings, and now that Iraqis feel they have some choice in the matter, concern that extreme elements on either side will impose their standards on the rest of the country is expected.

*c. Insurgency*

Rumors about the insurgency are very prevalent in Iraq, coming in a close second to quality of life concerns. Although I chose to list them as separate categories in order to highlight specific issues, there are commonalities between insurgency and the next two categories of security and terrorism, which if taken together notably equal over 40% of the rumors in Iraq. Many of the insurgency rumors are about resistance demands, threats, and calls for Jihad, but two interesting themes are also present. First, many Iraqis do not believe the Coalition has been tough enough on the resistance, leading them to believe that the US is actually supporting the resistance, and even conducting some of the attacks, in order to justify its presence in Iraq. They do not seem to understand that because the US does not know specifically who or where the resistance is, harsher military actions would affect innocent civilians as well. They seem to believe the US, much like they thought of Saddam with his numerous intelligence organizations, is all knowing and they therefore just have to wait for the problem to be taken care. It is crucial this perception be changed if the US is to make real headway in the counterinsurgency.

The second theme concerns the make-up and motivation of the resistance. There is the natural tendency to assume resistance fighters are all foreigners or Ba’athists, and that all the support they receive comes from Saddam and his family, Iran, or some other external source. There is tacit acknowledgement that Iraqis are also conducting attacks, but they are only doing it for the money. These rumors suggest that if economic and employment opportunities in Iraq were better, average Iraqis would not participate in



the resistance. This wishful attitude allows many Iraqis to shift all the blame for the insurgency—and their other problems—onto others.

*d. Security*

Almost tied in frequency with insurgency rumors are those concerning security, in which three dominant themes are present. Most significantly are threats against collaborators. Over 20% of security rumors, and almost 4% of all rumors, threaten attacks or death on Iraqis and their families if they work for or help the Coalition. Lists of names of translators and other ‘collaborators’ are rumored to be posted in mosques or in the possession of terrorists and insurgents, and businesses and hotels are reportedly being told they will be attacked if they serve Westerners. These rumors are creating widespread fear and undoubtedly limiting the number of Iraqis that dare to assist the Coalition or speak out against the groups and individuals causing unrest.

The second security theme concerns common crime, such as murders, theft, and kidnappings. Many of these rumored crimes are directed towards ‘innocents,’ including women, children, and even doctors. These rumors serve to warn of the dangerous environment in Baghdad, but also invoke a great deal of fear. For instance, rumors that doctors are being kidnapped for ransom have reportedly caused many doctors to go into hiding. These fears, and the reactions to them, ultimately interfere in other aspects of Iraqis’ lives, such as the ability to get medical care if the doctors are all in hiding.

This leads to the last security theme, the performance of the Iraqi security forces. Opinions appear to vary, with some saying the Iraqi police are more polite and effective than Coalition forces, while others claim the police are corrupt, lazy, and even working with the criminals and terrorists. Several rumors blame Iraqi security force shortcomings on the US, claiming the police are improperly used for political aims and against terrorism, and not allowed to focus on crime. Others say the US has not armed the police adequately, undermines their efforts to arrest criminals by immediately releasing them, and generally does not respect them. Once again, rumors claim the US wants the police to be weak so it can justify its need to be in Iraq.

*e. Terrorism*

Two primary themes are evident in rumors about terrorism. First, the terrorists are not Iraqis. Similar to beliefs about resistance fighters, but much more adamant, are rumors that the terrorists come from other Middle Eastern countries, like Iran, Kuwait, and the Sudan, because suicide attacks are not characteristic of the Iraqi people. Much as the US is prone to do, many Iraqis have also blamed all the terror attacks on a single person, Abu Musab al Zarqawi, who they believe was “created” by the US to perpetuate terrorism and provide yet another excuse to stay in Iraq. While there is no doubt that many terrorists are foreign to Iraq, this line of thinking serves to remove any fault for the current situation from the Iraqi people.

Interestingly, the second theme somewhat contradicts rumors of US plots to keep terrorism alive and well. While many of the terrorism-related rumors were about the fear of future attacks and the power these groups have over Iraqi lives, almost 20% of these reports were actually wish rumors that the US already had or was in the process of stopping the terrorists. For example, numerous rumors claimed the US had already captured Zarqawi and other well-known figures, but was waiting to announce their arrests for political reasons. There was also a rumor that the US was sending 400 specially trained FBI agents to Iraq to solve the terrorism problem. These rumors indicate a positive desire for US help, but will likely lead to further hostility if the US cannot improve the situation.

*f. Military*

Most rumors about US forces concern their behavior, and are almost exclusively negative. US forces are rumored to steal from Iraqis during house searches, indiscriminately target civilians, drive too aggressively, and to generally be rude. When these rumors are compared to poll data taken from the April 2004 CNN/USA Today/Gallup Poll, however, 94% of respondents said they had never actually had any personal contact with US forces. Granted, this poll covered all of Iraq, not just Baghdad, but this statistic goes to show how damaging rumors can be and how a few isolated incidents can influence perception.

Another interesting theme is that US forces are using special weapons against the Iraqi people. One rumor claimed a sleeping agent was used to knock Saddam

out, causing the sheep in a nearby field to sleep for a week; or that interrogators were using a special ray on Saddam to make him talk. Other, more serious rumors claim US forces are deliberately infecting the population with AIDS, and that candy distributed by Coalition soldiers is poisoned. These rumors perpetuate fear of the Coalition, with many undoubtedly started by enemy propagandists for precisely that purpose, but they should not be simply dismissed as they have the power to prevent Iraqis from talking to and cooperating with Coalition forces.

***g. Communication***

There were not that many rumors focused primarily on communication (less than 4%), however since the purpose of this thesis is to aid the battle for hearts and minds, which relies so heavily on communication, I included it. One important theme emerged from this category, and is reinforced by many of the rumors in other categories—the Coalition does not appear to be getting its message out effectively. Many Iraqis do not trust they are getting the whole story from the Coalition or the Arab news outlets. Some rumors suggest the US is purposefully lying and withholding information, going so far as to kill journalists who are exposing its lies. For example, US reports that terrorists have been captured are not believed because no pictures are released and there is no follow up on how they are punished. The Arab media also receives some blame for not reporting all the attacks in Iraq. Furthermore, while there is some recognition that the satellite news channels do not say anything positive about the Coalition, because Iraqis do not see the Coalition side of the story they assume what the Arab media reports is true. These rumors indicate that the US should not expect Iraqis to search out the Coalition message on new radio or TV channels, but should take the Coalition message to the sources Iraqis already watch and listen to. Overall, the perceived unwillingness of the US to share information with the Iraqis is attributed to the US not valuing or respecting them.

***h. Detainees***

The final category concerns detainee rumors, the results of which I found surprising. I expected there to be a significant number of hostility rumors pertaining to the Abu Ghuraib prisoner abuse scandal revealed in late April 2004, but only 1.7% of rumors mentioned Iraqi detainees or the prison. Most rumors occurred in the first two weeks of May and then quickly died down; some of these rumors did not even condemn

the abuse, but condemned the US for releasing so many prisoners so quickly in the aftermath. Many Iraqis were fearful that hardened criminals were being let loose. I kept this category intact precisely because the numbers were so low. There is no doubt that Iraqis are angry and concerned about the appalling abuses that were uncovered, and the US definitely did not win any hearts or minds over the incident, so why were there not more rumors pertaining to it? While I can only speculate, two possibilities come to mind. First, although Iraqis are definitely upset about the incident, perhaps Americans are more enraged. Most Americans believe in the high standards we advertise to the world and are duly shocked and embarrassed by these atrocities. The fact that there have not been more rumors or apparent shock by Iraqis may be quite telling of their low opinion of US standards. The abuse, after all, is not new, only the perpetrators. The second possibility is more optimistic. The US responded to the incident incredibly fast—charging and trying guards, replacing the prison leadership, reducing the number of prisoners, and even promising to build a modern new prison and demolish the traces of Abu Ghuraib. Perhaps this demonstration satisfied some of the Iraqi anger as they saw the US attempt to rectify the situation. While one hopes the second possibility is more applicable, there is also the risk of Iraqis wondering why such speed and efficiency is not applied to their other problems and concerns.

Table 3. Rumor Subject Typology Results

CONCERNS	RESULTS (966 Total)	Hostility/Fear/ Wish/Curiosity	SIGNIFICANT THEMES
<b>Government/ Political</b>	26.6%	<b>H – 41.6%</b> F – 31.5% W – 6.2% C – 20.6%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Transfer of authority concerns</li> <li>– International plots/interference in Iraq</li> <li>– Sectarian strife/possible civil war</li> </ul>
<b>Quality of Life</b>	18.1%	<b>H – 33.1%</b> F – 26.9% W – 12.6% C – 27.4%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Struggle for daily survival</li> <li>– Fleeing of Iraq</li> <li>– Changing character of Iraq</li> </ul>
<b>Insurgency</b>	17.0%	H – 32.3% <b>F – 39.0%</b> W – 7.3% C – 21.3%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– US not tough enough on resistance; supporting insurgents to perpetuate instability</li> <li>– Membership/motivation of resistance</li> </ul>
<b>Security</b>	16.7%	H – 18.6% <b>F – 56.5%</b> W – 8.7% C – 16.1%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Threats against collaborators</li> <li>– Rampant crime</li> <li>– Performance of Iraqi Police</li> </ul>
<b>Terrorism</b>	9.3%	<b>H – 45.6%</b> F – 25.6% W – 18.9% C – 10.0%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– All terrorists are foreigners</li> <li>– US perpetuating terrorism</li> <li>– US is solving the terrorism problem</li> </ul>
<b>Military</b>	7.2%	<b>H – 61.4%</b> F – 18.6% W – 5.7% C – 14.3%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Bad behavior of US forces</li> <li>– “Special” weapons used by the Coalition</li> </ul>
<b>Communication</b>	3.5%	H – 17.8% F – 5.9% W – 2.9% <b>C – 74.9%</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Coalition not effectively getting its message out</li> <li>– Lack of trust</li> </ul>
<b>Detainees</b>	1.7%	<b>H – 50.0%</b> F – 31.3% W – 6.3% C – 12.5%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Condemnation of Abu Ghuraib scandal</li> <li>– Fear of released prisoners/criminals</li> </ul>

### C. DISCUSSION

The rumors reported in the *Baghdad Mosquito* provide a wealth of information, but there are some limitations to the data and its analysis that must be recognized. First, the ascriptive identity of the person reporting the rumor is not disclosed, making it more difficult to determine the true motivation of each rumor. For example, the wish rumor about Saddam having cancer and possibly dying within a year could have been classified as a fear rumor if the person transmitting the rumor was pro-Saddam and wanted him to return to power. It is less likely a Kurd or Shi'a would feel this way, but it is possible that a Sunni might. Therefore, in order to classify some rumors it was necessary to select the most probable underlying motivation, based on the tone of the individual rumor as well as the tone and motivations of other rumors reported during the same session.

The second limitation is cultural—Americans classified the rumors. Despite concerted efforts to categorize rumors from the Iraqi perspective, there were frequent occasions during the initial classification processes when American values or perspectives were unconsciously applied. Further scrutiny and refinement of the coding process identified these errors and they were corrected. However, as the next chapter illustrates, there are significant differences in how Americans and Arabs communicate, which could also result in misinterpretations.

Overall, the two rumor typologies complemented each other extremely well, providing general indications of Iraqi opinions and morale as well as highlighting specific concerns of the Iraqi people. Information operations and psychological operations units could use these findings to tailor campaigns that address many of these concerns. This study also provides a general framework for public affairs representatives, alerting them to existing perceptions and enabling them to tailor messages and avoid perpetuating negative ideas. Finally, this study could be used as a baseline for future studies to assess the effectiveness of the rumor remedies presented in the next chapter.

## **IV. CULTURE, COMMUNICATION & RUMOR REMEDIES**

In both the American and Arab cultures, communication is fundamental,  
yet each views communication fundamentally different.

- R.S. Zaharna

One of the purposes of studying rumors is to find ways to prevent or curb them, averting the devastation rumors often cause. The goal of this chapter is to present rumor remedies that can be applied in Iraq. One of the principal elements in controlling rumors is effective communication, however, and it is well established that different cultures communicate in different ways. In order to successfully refute and prevent rumors in Iraq, we must therefore understand how Iraqis communicate. To do this, American and Arab cultural communication styles are compared to highlight disparities and sources of misunderstanding that are sabotaging our communication efforts. This chapter then reviews existing rumor remedies, designed primarily for Western audiences, and adapts them for effective use in Iraq based on these cultural communication styles.

### **A. CULTURE & COMMUNICATION**

When effective, communication has the power to foster understanding, trust and security, increasing the likelihood of cooperation. Communication is the process of exchanging messages and creating meaning. It is only effective to the extent that the audience receiving the message attaches meaning that is relatively similar to what was intended. (Gudykunst n.d.) In order to successfully communicate, therefore, one must not only consider the content and delivery of the message, but also how an audience is likely to interpret and respond to it. Effective communication is a challenge within one's own community, but becomes exponentially harder when trying to communicate with people from different cultures, as is evident in the Middle East. Despite multi-million dollar media campaigns, the creation of television and radio stations, and appearances by high ranking US officials on Arab television, anti-American sentiment continues to grow in the region. (Snow 2003) Some would suggest it is the language barrier that prevents effective communication. Many praised the performance of former US Ambassador Christopher Ross, who addressed Arab television audiences in fluent Arabic soon after 9/11. According to some Arab communication experts, however, Ross spoke like a

hesitant diplomat, repeating his words and thoughts without any passion for what he was stating, suggesting Arab audiences were less impressed than those in Washington, DC. (Fakhreddine 2002) On the other hand, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who speaks no Arabic and had to use a translator, was able to overcome the language barrier with a passionate delivery on the Arab television network al-Jazeera. “Every facial, body, and hand gesture Blair made with each word he uttered seemed to communicate genuine belief in what he had to say.” (Fakhreddine 2002) Thus, effective communication is more than just translating words from one language to another. Others would argue that Arabs’ negative perceptions of the US have nothing to do with communication; rather they are the result of divisive policies and actions such as the war in Iraq. However, the primary purpose of public diplomacy and many psychological operations is to garner foreign support, especially during conflicts or for controversial policies. (Zaharna n.d.; Stillwell 1996) Our inability to do so reflects our failure to communicate effectively with the people in the Middle East.

### **1. American vs. Arab Cultural Communication Styles**

Culture is a shared system of values, attitudes, beliefs, customs, and thoughts. It is a consensus about the meaning of symbols—both verbal and nonverbal—held by members of a community. (Barnett and Lee 2002) This consensus is largely unconscious, with individuals following rules they are often not even aware of, such as how close to stand to one another. While no two individuals follow these rules in precisely the same way, the concept of culture allows us to examine societies as collective entities, identify common patterns, and even predict behavior to some extent.

Each culture has its own style and concept of communication. Americans tend to have an information or transmission-centered view. Communication is seen primarily as a means to transfer data, with problems often attributed to a lack of information. As a result, they favor efficient, large-scale methods that get the word out to the most people—a concept embodied by the mass media. (Zaharna 2003) Arabs tend to have a relationship or ritual-centered view of communication; its primary purpose is to connect people. When communication problems occur, they are often referred to as relationship problems, with people turning to mediators to improve the situation. As a result, the most effective and preferred way to communicate is interpersonally—or face-to-face. While



recognized that this may not be the most efficient method, interpersonal communication is the most familiar and credible means for sharing information in Arab cultures. (Zaharna 2003) The prevalence of rumors in Iraq demonstrates the power of interpersonal communication over the extensive media networks developed by the US. TV may get a message out, but personal discussions shape what that message is.

Because American and Arab communication styles are so asymmetric, sincere efforts to connect may actually lead to increased misunderstandings and further magnify the existing cultural divide. (U.S. Congress 2003) Identifying and comparing where cultures fall along several recognized dimensions of communication, and adapting one's style to accommodate variations is required. It is also imperative to avoid ethnocentrism and understand that neither the American nor Arab (nor any other) style is correct or superior to the other—they are simply different. The following are some of the most recognized aspects of communication and how American and Arab styles compare. (See Table 4 for a summary.)

**a. *Individualism vs. Collectivism***

One of the major dimensions used to explain cultural variations is individualism-collectivism. Some scholars argue that the factor differentiating individualistic and collectivistic cultures is the role and importance each places on in-groups. (Gudykunst and Lee 2002) The US is a very individualistic culture, with Americans typically belonging to many in-groups, such as their family, religion, profession, school, social clubs, etc. These relationships often only influence behavior in certain settings related to that group, however, and tend to be short-term and utilitarian based—there must be some benefit to being a member or the individual will leave. Furthermore, personal goals are valued or take precedence over group goals. People are expected to look after themselves and their immediate family, while social ties and obligations outside this nucleus are very loose or non-existent. Personal rights and responsibilities are emphasized, privacy and self-expression are prized, and individual freedom is held dear. When communicating, members of individualistic societies strive for clarity, and often perceive direct requests as the most effective strategy for accomplishing goals. (Gudykunst and Lee 2002)

Arab cultures, on the other hand, tend to be collectivistic. People are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which protect and care for them throughout their lives in exchange for loyalty. They typically only belong to a few in-groups—often family, religion and ethnicity—but these groups influence behavior across all situations and often to a much greater extent than most Americans are accustomed to. Relationships in these cultures are usually long term and based on implicit trust or some historical connection. (Zaharna 2003) Individuals will go so far as to sacrifice opportunities for personal gain in exchange for the needs of the larger group. Community, harmony, and tradition are emphasized in collectivistic cultures, along with the need to maintain face. (Anderson et al. 2002) To ensure social amity when communicating, they usually try to avoid hurting others' feelings, imposing on them, or causing someone to lose face publicly, which means direct requests are often the least effective strategy for accomplishing a goal. (Gudykunst and Lee 2002)

***b. Low-Context vs. High-Context***

Another significant difference in communication styles between most Americans and Arabs is context, or how much meaning is given to what is actually said versus the circumstances in which it is said. Americans tend to be low-context, deriving meaning from conversations based predominantly on the words exchanged. They tend to communicate in an explicit and direct fashion, voicing opinions and trying to persuade others to accept their viewpoints with irrefutable facts. Americans place a great deal of emphasis on accuracy, evidence, rationality, and other features common to print or the written word. Computers, math and legal systems embody low-context language because everything must be spelled out with nothing taken for granted.

Arabs cultures, on the other hand, are typically high-context. Much of the information conveyed can only be understood by looking at all of the circumstances surrounding a conversation—who said it, when, where, how, to whom, etc. Facial expressions, posture, movements, speed and location of interaction all have meaning. Not surprisingly, people from high-context cultures are very good at noticing and understanding nonverbal cues. When language barriers exist, they often place even more importance on nonverbal signals, which can lead to further misunderstandings when different cultural styles are involved. (Zaharna 2004)

*c. Direct vs. Indirect*

Related to context is whether a culture communicates in a direct or indirect manner. In low-context cultures like the US, the speaker is responsible for getting their meaning across. As a result, Americans tend to speak in a very direct manner, striving to remove expressive overtones and suggestive allusions from their communication in order to provide precise facts or expectations. Clarity and emotional objectivity are prized and seen as signs of competence and candor, while losing one's composure is equivalent to losing one's objectivity. To avoid appearing overly emotional, Americans tend towards understatement. Meant to boost credibility, this characteristic often has the opposite affect on Arabs, who interpret speakers as not being completely truthful or fully presenting a situation. Walter Cronkite is often considered the US model for effective communication, especially when it comes to the media or diplomacy. His stoic figure, low authoritative and steady voice, and calm demeanor made him the "most trusted man in America." (Zaharna 2004) Unfortunately, Arabs may perceive this style of communication as condescending, belaboring the obvious, or even excessively talkative when too many facts are offered up to prove a point. (Anderson et al. 2002)

In high-context cultures like Iraq, the burden of meaning falls on the listener to interpret the message correctly due to their indirect style of communication. (Zaharna n.d.) Because saving face is so important, communication skills are measured by how cleverly one can disguise criticism. Arabs deliberately use affect and ambiguity to create subtle nuances in meaning. They allude to shared experiences, sentiments or verbal associations to express and evoke responses. Precision or facts are not as important as creating emotional resonance, thus a single anecdote, metaphor, or analogy may provide sufficient evidence or be persuasive enough to reach a conclusion, compared to the Western ideal of the more facts the better. (Zaharna 1995) For Arabs, emotions are often the most important part of the story and overstatement is commonly used as a tool to convey the appropriate feelings. Emotional neutrality, especially in an emotionally charged context, can be perceived as a lack of credibility or even deception—if a person hides their emotions what else are they hiding? (Zaharna 2004)

This indirect style of communication may result in the perception that Arabs are reticent, sneaky, deceitful, or mysterious. (Anderson et al. 2002)

***d. Doing vs. Being***

It is also important to consider how each culture identifies themselves and what traits they hold in esteem. Americans are the ultimate “doing” or activity oriented culture, as embodied in their “can do” attitude. They emphasize and value measurable accomplishments and successes. The concept of the “self-made man (or woman)” is celebrated because it suggests that anyone, regardless of his or her background, can achieve success if only they work hard enough and “do” enough.

Arabs typically belong to “being” cultures based on their traditionally vertical social hierarchy. Birth, family background, age, and rank are often more important than what someone does. Even if they achieve financial or political success, some Arabs will spend enormous amounts of money to have their lineages traced in the hopes of uncovering connections to prominent tribes. This also explains why the concept of honor is so central to Iraqis, and Arabs in general. If a member does something dishonorable or is dishonored, it reflects upon the whole family or tribe, threatening all of their social standings unless corrective or retaliatory action is taken.

***e. Future-Oriented vs. Past-Oriented***

Arabs and Americans also view time differently, with Americans belonging to future-oriented and Arabs past-oriented cultures. In the US, change and innovation are welcomed, the latest is often considered the greatest, and in the optimistic words of Scarlett O’Hara, “...tomorrow is another day.” In other words, the future holds the promise of being better and brighter and is something to look forward to. History is often considered irrelevant, and dwelling on the past is frowned upon and perceived as an inability to cope with the present. Instead of focusing on the past, Americans spend a lot of time planning and forecasting the future, evident in how common it is to hear them say, “I will...” (Zaharna n.d.)

Arabs, and other past-oriented cultures, place much more significance on the historical continuity of human existence. From their perspective, without comprehending the past, it is impossible to understand and attribute the correct meaning to events in the present. As a result, much time and energy are devoted to historical

studies, and traditions and customs are cherished and preserved. Furthermore, many Muslims believe the future is in the hands of God, not the prerogative of man, and it is therefore naïve and arrogant to discuss what “will” occur. (Zaharna n.d.) This is why many Muslims invoke the phrase “*insha 'Allah*” or “God-willing” whenever future events or activities are discussed. It does not indicate a lack of commitment; rather only God knows what the future holds.

*f. Monochronic vs. Polychronic*

Another difference in how Americans and Arabs conceive of time is reflected in how they use it. Americans are a monochronic culture, viewing time as linear—often using time lines or similar devices to depict it. Punctuality, schedules, and plans are valued because time is a real, limited commodity, during which task achievement is the primary goal. For Americans, keeping time commitments and adhering to deadlines is indicative of one’s character, while Arab cultures often interpret this focus on time as rigid and myopic. (Zaharna n.d.) Because of this conception, monochronic cultures prefer to focus on methodically doing one thing at a time. For example, Americans patiently form lines and wait their turn as sales clerks or bureaucrats help each person because they see this as the most efficient means to get things done. They consider it chaotic to try and do too many things at once.

Polychronic cultures view time as cyclical, suggesting that time is fluid and abstract—what passes can reoccur later. Schedules are created and used, but they are rather loose and flexible, with individuals seldom becoming upset if they are not followed. Arabs have no problem doing many things at once, or multitasking, and do not see the necessity of matching specific activities with specific time frames. (Zaharna n.d.) Unlike in monochronic cultures where task completion is the goal, polychronic cultures value relationships and conversation. In Arab stores or offices, for example, attendants will handle several customers at once so as to please everyone at the same time. No one has to wait. They believe focusing on tasks instead of people is very insulting, while Americans may feel as if nothing is being accomplished or that they are not getting enough personal attention.

***g. Linear vs. Nonlinear***

Finally, there are differences in how Arabs and Americans process information. Americans tend to have linear thought patterns, stressing beginnings and endings. They tend to arrange their thoughts logically, and often sequentially, in order to discern empirical evidence. They prefer to think about one thing at a time, often claiming headaches or frustration when simultaneously bombarded by too many ideas. Written text is representative of how linear cultures prefer to process information.

Arabs belong to nonlinear cultures. They tend to think in images, not just words, incorporating multiple themes in a seemingly random order. Television best represents how nonlinear cultures process information. (Zaharna n.d.) Although these cultures may be perceived as illogical or disorganized by Americans, Arabs believe that dissecting and rigidly structuring ideas or events is equivalent to separating the parts from the whole, which would result in loss of meaning and emotional significance.

It should now be apparent that Americans and Arabs have distinct, often conflicting, styles of communication. Although often overlooked or discounted, being cognizant of differing cultural styles and norms, and adjusting communication styles to bridge those differences, is necessary. As the next section shows, one of the principle elements of rumor remedies is effective communication. If these cultural communication differences are recognized and accounted for, I propose it is possible for the US to successfully adapt and apply rumor remedies in Iraq, alleviating many of the underlying fears and anxieties that currently exist.

Table 4. Cultural Styles of Communication (After: Zaharna n.d.)

AMERICANS	ARABS
Individualism	Collectivism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Individual goals/accomplishments valued</li> <li>- Networking among groups</li> <li>- Functional, utilitarian relationships maintained for one's own benefit</li> <li>- Easy to begin functional relations, easy to sever nonfunctional relations</li> <li>- Relationships can be short-term</li> <li>- Fluid boundaries between in/out-group members</li> <li>- Value individual freedom and choice</li> <li>- Value equality in social relationships</li> <li>- Value horizontal communication among equals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Group goals/solidarity valued over indiv. goals</li> <li>- In-group loyalty/allegiance strongly valued</li> <li>- Relationships long-term, trust important</li> <li>- Relationship building of paramount importance</li> <li>- Distrustful of members of out-groups</li> <li>- Important to preserve "public face" of group</li> <li>- Dislike public confrontation, prefer private mediation</li> <li>- Value well-defined social structure, clear roles</li> <li>- Value hierarchy of superior/subordinate roles</li> <li>- Comfortable with vertical communication</li> </ul>
Low-Context	High-Context
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Meaning in message; explicit</li> <li>- Include details in message</li> <li>- Speaker responsible for message clarity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Meaning in context; implicit</li> <li>- Details in context, not message</li> <li>- Listener responsible for understanding message</li> </ul>
Direct	Indirect
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Direct, to the point</li> <li>- Clear</li> <li>- Objective (remain emotionally neutral)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Indirect, circular</li> <li>- Ambiguous, vague</li> <li>- Subjective (deliberately use emotion)</li> </ul>
Doing Oriented	Being Oriented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Emphasis on doing, action, achievement</li> <li>- Emphasis on measurable actions or product</li> <li>- Reward/recognition for doing and achievements</li> <li>- Strong tie between word and deed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Emphasis on social position</li> <li>- Self defined by who one is in relation to others</li> <li>- High regard or respect for social standing, regardless of achievements</li> </ul>
Future Oriented	Past Oriented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Value on future (new, improved, advanced)</li> <li>- Ease in visualizing future activities/possibilities</li> <li>- View change and unknown as positive challenges</li> <li>- Takes risks despite unknown consequences</li> <li>- Frustrated or impatient with delays</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Value on past (history, culture, tradition)</li> <li>- Easily see connection between past and present</li> <li>- Discomfort working with unknown/future events</li> <li>- Difficulty conceptualizing activities in future, such as planning or strategizing</li> </ul>
Monochronic Communication	Polychronic Communication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- View time as linear</li> <li>- Time can be divided into measurable units</li> <li>- Value punctuality, scheduling &amp; planning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- View time as nonlinear, can be seen as cyclical</li> <li>- Time not segmented, more fluid</li> <li>- Loose adherence to scheduling</li> </ul>
Linear Style	Non-linear Style
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- One theme</li> <li>- Clear structural organization w/ beginning &amp; end</li> <li>- Time segmented</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- May have multiple themes</li> <li>- Organizational structure fluid</li> <li>- Time fluid</li> </ul>

## **B. RUMOR REMEDIES**

In Iraq, combating rumors could alleviate many of the misperceptions and possibly even resentment that is currently flourishing, improving our chances at winning hearts and minds and effectively fighting the insurgency. Rosnow proposed three general principles for rumor remedies, which I have categorized as proactive, reactive, and damage control. (Rosnow 1991) Each principle is presented, followed by suggested adaptations and applications for Iraq based on the cultural communication styles just discussed. (See Table 5.)

### **1. Proactive**

The first principle is to monitor and anticipate the conditions under which rumors thrive—uncertainty and anxiety—and defuse them before damaging rumors develop. This is done by ensuring lines of communication are open and accessible, and authorities are truthful in responding to concerns so as not to breed mistrust. It is also important for authorities to provide as much information as possible without a community having to ask for it. People must have faith and confidence in their leaders and media to provide complete, accurate information, otherwise they will always wonder what they are not being told and try to fill in the gaps themselves. Finally, teaching people about the destructive nature of false rumors before they occur may also help stem their spread. This proactive approach to rumor remedies is the most likely to be effective, for once suspicions and prejudices take hold of a population, they become much more difficult to dispel. Researchers and various business organizations have repeatedly demonstrated this principle works in the West (Kimmel 2004), but distrust and hostility of the US is already rampant in Iraq. While it is too late to prevent current rumors, there is little doubt the US will be involved in Iraq for the foreseeable future. We need to begin establishing a foundation of trust today in order to prevent damaging rumors in the future.

Rosnow suggests authorities establish trust by building a record of honest, forthright communication. Fortunately, most Americans have confidence in their leaders and the media to keep them accurately informed. In Iraq and the rest of the Middle East, however, providing information alone is unlikely to produce trust. How that information is transmitted, and by whom, may be just as important as the information itself. Concerted efforts to establish and build relationships are required before trust will



develop and information is likely to be fully considered. There are numerous levels at which relationships can be built, and the US—including Americans of every rank and position—should actively pursue them all. The most effective is the personal, one-on-one relationship, which simply requires an investment of time and appreciation of communication styles and cultural norms. While this approach may seem inefficient, extended Arab social networks should serve to multiply efforts as family and friends learn of the relationship. Additionally, this is the most forgiving level to accommodate cultural differences. If mistakes are made or misunderstandings occur, they can be apologized for or explained immediately. At this level, sincerity and good intentions can go a long way. Once established, personal relationships are likely to be stronger and more trusting than any other type.

The next type of relationship is at the community level, which can be established by regular participation in community forums, town halls, or similar events. A personal element is still present, but differences in communication styles must be accounted for more closely because groups tend to be less forgiving than individuals. At this level, the opportunity exists to share and debate information, discuss community concerns, but most importantly to listen. Americans tend to think there is a solution for everything and often try to help others by providing them, but they do not always wait to hear what the question or problem is. Many times people just want to express their frustrations. This does not mean ideas cannot be offered, but they should be presented as part of group problem solving efforts, with care taken not to overshadow or embarrass community members. This also does not mean that one cannot disagree with members of the community. Debate and discussions are passionate and prevalent throughout the Middle East, but cultural styles must be considered and adopted. Americans tend to be competitive and strong-willed, but should remember that if the goal is to build relationships, it is not important to win every debate—it may even be counterproductive.

The last type of relationship examined here is one established via the mass media. While this vehicle is the most difficult and least effective way to build relationships, television and radio are becoming increasingly prevalent in the Middle East and should be addressed. If used effectively, the ability to reach and influence large populations exists. In the 1950s, for example, Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser became the

defacto leader of Arab Nationalism throughout much of the Middle East due in part to his regular and charismatic “Voice of the Arabs” radio broadcasts. Today, state controlled media predominates in the Middle East and is generally recognized for what it is—a vehicle for promoting the ruling regimes. Therefore, any state controlled media channels, including those funded by the US, are viewed with skepticism. Independent media in the Middle East is a relatively recent phenomenon, with one of the most influential and widely known independent Arab news channels, al-Jazeera, established in just 1996. Although funded in part by the Qatari government, al-Jazeera has proven to operate with few government restrictions, and is therefore one of the more trusted news sources in the region. Regardless of the source or channel, however, mass media in the Middle East is still seen as less credible than face-to-face communication. (Rugh 2004) The media is the least forgiving environment for communicating across cultures because it is a one-way conversation—audiences cannot participate and clarify ambiguous verbal or nonverbal signals. Despite these challenges, building relationships with audiences may be possible and would signal a willingness to engage the Arab world, but regular participation is required. Appearances on talk shows or other forums where audiences can watch interpersonal interactions with a host or other guests and call in their own questions would facilitate relationship building much more so than broadcasting prepared speeches or statements.

The primary requirement for all relationship-building efforts, regardless of the level, is time. Sharing a cup of tea once a month, attending a community meeting every quarter, or appearing on TV once or twice will not suffice. Relationships require dedication and energy and must be built before they are needed. There are no quick fixes, but once relationships are established, trusted avenues will exist for addressing and alleviating uncertainties and anxieties before they become damaging rumors.

## **2. Reactive**

If prevention fails and destructive rumors begin to circulate, Rosnow’s second principle is to pay attention to what they reveal about the sources of people’s anxieties and uncertainties, and work to alleviate the underlying causes. It is important to note that severe anxieties (or emotional unease) must be diminished before uncertainties (intellectual doubts) can effectively be tackled. (Rosnow 1988) Reducing idleness,

monotony, or disorganization in a population can sometimes decrease anxiety. (Knapp 1944) During wars or natural disasters, for example, by involving the local populace in community efforts or programs to improve their situations, they have less time to dwell on uncertain future events. Additionally, they gain the satisfaction of “doing something” versus just waiting for the unknown. (Allport 1943) Once anxieties are at a less intense level, trusted sources providing complete, accurate information and refuting damaging rumors will help repair the situation.

The US needs to respond to the destructive rumors currently circulating in Iraq. There is a common belief, however, that it is neither feasible nor advisable to refute rumors. Many people believe that by publicly acknowledging a rumor, even if only to prove it false, the rumor will gain credibility or spawn additional tales. However, the best evidence on rumor refutation shows that if a rumor has been heard, the least effective approach is to provide no comment.<sup>21</sup> It is more effective to refute the rumor, and most effective to refute the rumor with a trusted source that does not have a vested interest in the subject. It is also important to provide a context or reason for the refutation, especially for those that may not have heard the rumor yet. (DiFonzo and Bordia 2000) For example, if a Coalition spokesman were to make the statement that candy handed out by US forces is safe to eat, it would most likely result in increased suspicion among Iraqis about that candy. A more successful approach would be for the spokesman to state that contrary to rumors claiming the candy is poisoned, which were likely started by individuals trying to scare Iraqis, US forces only hand out candy as a gesture of friendship and it is safe to eat. The most successful approach would be if a trusted Iraqi conveyed that message. It is when no context is provided, or the source is not trusted, that refutations can be detrimental and perpetuate rumors. Other guidelines for addressing rumors are to always and immediately confirm true rumors, or any part of a rumor that is true, and refute false rumors with consistent, memorable messages based on the truth. (DiFonzo and Bordia 2000) Lies, half-truths, or skirting issues will only feed distrust and lead to additional rumors. This is not to suggest that rumors can ever be totally eliminated, or that every rumor should be refuted, but damaging rumors that negatively influence Iraqi perceptions and behaviors should be reined in.

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<sup>21</sup> DiFonzo, Nicholas. E-mail to the author. 26 Aug 2004.

In Iraq, the first challenge is to find out what those rumors are. As the *Baghdad Mosquito* has ably demonstrated, “sonar men,” or trusted individuals who report rumors as they occur, work well and should be instituted in other areas of the country. (DiFonzo, Bordia, and Rosnow 1994) Once rumors are collected, care must be taken when deciphering their content, with cultural communication styles taken into account. As I suggested in the last chapter, this is not an easy task. Among other characteristics, Arabs’ indirect style of communication and focus on emotional resonance may result in overstatements or allusions that can mask the underlying concerns of a rumor. For example, in mid-July 2004, one of the Iraqi participants in a *Baghdad Mosquito* meeting said she hopes the Minister of Electricity dies. When asked privately why she made this comment she said, “He has done nothing but lie to us. He made so many promises, and yet we suffer.” When US personnel mentioned how difficult it was to rebuild a power infrastructure with all the sabotage and attacks taking place she replied, “Then he should keep his mouth shut and not promise anything.”<sup>22</sup> If one was not familiar with Arab communication styles, they might assume this woman personally despised the Minister of Electricity instead of recognizing she was underscoring her extreme frustration with the erratic electricity situation in Baghdad. Even Americans with experience communicating with Arabs may have some difficulty recognizing the true tone and motivation of reported rumors. Consultation with Iraqis when classifying rumors, especially those relaying the information and who know the context in which they were transmitted, is invaluable and would provide a more accurate picture. Overall, rumor content must be considered in the appropriate context of the culture they emanate from.

After officials collect and track circulating rumors, they need to determine which ones should be addressed; it is not feasible, and may even be counterproductive, to try and address every rumor. It is impossible to establish hard and fast rules, but the general guideline should be to counter rumors that negatively impact the Coalition’s mission. This includes rumors that deter Iraqis from cooperating with the Coalition, those that prevent or impair relationship-building efforts, and those that may promote violence. It should be remembered that if anxiety levels are too high, any efforts to refute rumors are unlikely to be effective. Reducing anxieties by addressing the underlying concerns

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<sup>22</sup> *Baghdad Mosquito*, 16 July 2004.

conveyed in rumors, such as improving the availability of medicine, should be attempted whenever possible. Regrettably, the US missed an opportunity to significantly diminish Iraqi anxieties immediately after the occupation began by not mobilizing communities and involving them more heavily in reconstruction efforts. A year and half later, there are still rumors and comments that no Iraqis (or Arabs for that matter) have reconstruction contracts. While employment opportunities have improved somewhat and local efforts, such as community clean-up projects, are recognized and appreciated, there is still a significant portion of the population—particularly young, frustrated men—with nothing to do. The large, complex projects the Coalition has focused on are certainly important, and undoubtedly require outside expertise, but more local projects should be developed to involve the Iraqi people, even if they are low- or no-priority endeavors.

Even when anxiety levels are reduced to a moderate level, refuting rumors solely with facts in Iraq is unlikely to be effective. As previously discussed, relationships must be built and trust established for rumors to be successfully refuted. When trusted relationships do not exist, or are not well developed, it may prove beneficial to channel information through mediators, such as Iraqi government officials or local sheiks and ulama (religious leaders). Care should be taken, however, to ensure mediators are not viewed as mouthpieces or puppets of the Coalition, which would erode their trusted positions and diminish their effectiveness.

Regardless of who is transmitting the message, remedies should be tailored to the motive behind the rumor. Rumors motivated by fact-finding, as was evident in many of the curiosity rumors in Iraq, would most effectively be diminished by making the sought after information more accessible. For example, providing regular, meaningful status updates on reconstruction efforts, including notifications of problems or delays, may decrease uncertainty about the electricity situation. Promises, especially those that might be impossible to keep, should be avoided. Instead, open a dialogue with the Iraqis and demonstrate awareness and empathy that these issues affect their daily lives—identifying with them on an emotional and personal level will likely go a long way. Furthermore, these updates would highlight the negative impact the insurgents are having on individual Iraqis, especially if pictures of sabotaged and attacked infrastructure are provided and linked with specific shortages, and would perhaps encourage more Iraqis to speak out

against them. Rumors motivated by self-enhancement, typical of hostility rumors, are more difficult to dispel. While reducing uncertainty may help somewhat, working within trusted relationships is likely to be more effective. For instance, rumors that the US is lying about the number of casualties it has received are unlikely to be successfully refuted by releasing a public statement denying the rumor and reiterating US statistics. However, if US personnel were to discuss the issue with Iraqis they have established relationships with, mentioning how fortunate Coalition forces are to have good protective gear that helps to limit casualties, that rumor is more likely to diminish. Once again, regardless of how well established relationships are, it is not feasible to combat every rumor in Iraq, so efforts should be directed towards rumors that are the most damaging or threatening.

### **3. Damage Control**

In a situation like Iraq, it is inevitable that some destructive rumors will survive. Rosnow's last principle is to take steps to minimize the damage rumors cause if attempts to combat them fail, such as taking legal action against sources or transmitters. This last principle is mostly geared towards businesses or individuals, but even in those cases successful lawsuits cannot always undo the harm done to reputations. It is improbable rumors in Iraq could be traced to their original source, or that the US could pursue legal actions against them even if they were. However, when rumors become so widespread they are printed or broadcast in the media, corrections should immediately be submitted or interviews conducted, in a manner consistent with Arab communication styles, to refute the false claims. When these actions are not taken, perhaps because they are not seen as important or significant enough, Iraqis have little recourse but to assume they have heard the whole story, adding credence to the rumor. If certain papers or channels refuse to acknowledge these requests, question why they do not want the Iraqi people to know the truth via other Arab channels. Just as the US media may distort or misrepresent issues, so will some Arab media outlets, but the Coalition needs to maintain a policy of active engagement. In Iraq, the US may not be portrayed in the best light on every channel, but we cannot counter this negative image if we refuse to remain part of the conversation. In the words of General Joseph P. Hoar, USMC (Ret.),

It is not Al Gazeera's or Al Arabia's fault that we are badly portrayed in the Muslim world. It is our fault, because our message has been

inconsistent, legalistic and Western in its orientation. We can't win the war of ideas if our ideas are not good. (US Congress 2004)

Even with rapid, culturally tailored responses to false rumors, there is no question that rumors may damage the valuable relationships the Coalition should be working diligently to build. If this occurs, the best recourse is to find a mediator to help repair the situation. At the personal level, this may be a friend or relative. At the community level, a prominent or high-ranking member from a nearby community may suffice. Reestablishing trust and rebuilding relationships with a national or regional audience is much more difficult. Continuing to engage viewers through regular media appearances may help, or it may be possible, with support from interviewers or hosts, to make an emotional appeal to the audience. At all levels, demonstrate the relationship is important and worth the time and effort to salvage.

Finally, it may be possible to counter some of the negative effects of damaging rumors in Iraq. For instance, some of the most destructive rumors currently circulating in Baghdad are that individuals assisting the Coalition are being targeted. It is impossible to refute this rumor because there is likely an element of truth to it and there is no way adequate protection could be provided for every Iraqi that worked for or provided information to the Coalition. These rumors effectively force Iraqis to make the choice of remaining uninvolved or risking death. So how does one persuade the Iraqi people to take the dangerous path? The Coalition, or better yet the Iraqi government, could capitalize on this choice by promoting the heroism of the Iraqis that choose to cooperate. Subtly appeal to (but do not challenge) Iraqis patriotism, honor, and desire to build a freer, safer Iraq for their children. It is doubtful many Iraqis would be willing to reveal their identities, but messages could be disseminated in their own words and voices, acknowledging the risks they are taking and the fear they have, but explaining the important reasons why they chose to do so. This type of personal, nationalistic appeal to Iraqis, from Iraqis, to assist security efforts is likely to be much more effective than Coalition requests for assistance. It is also important for the Coalition to make it as safe and easy as possible for Iraqis to cooperate. Hotlines currently exist to report security information, but there is still fear of being identified.<sup>23</sup> Strengthen and improve these

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<sup>23</sup> Putnam, Bill. E-mail to the author. 1 Sep 2004.

types of programs, and educate Iraqis on ways they can help while maintaining their anonymity. If the Coalition is to beat the insurgency, active Iraqi cooperation is required, which means something must be done to counter the effects of these destructive rumors.

There are few hard and fast rules for effectively communicating or dealing with rumors in Iraq—or anyplace else for that matter—but the two are tightly linked. Rumors are unlikely to be successfully refuted without cross cultural communication skills, and it is difficult to effectively communicate with people filled with distrust and anxiety due to circulating rumors. It is not an easy challenge, but it is one we must pursue if the US is to win the hearts and minds of the Iraqis and defeat the insurgency. If we fail to address this source of hostility and fear now, it is likely to become more pervasive and destructive in the future.

Table 5. Rumor Remedies

	<b>PROACTIVE</b>	<b>REACTIVE</b>	<b>DAMAGE CONTROL</b>
<b>Goal</b>	– Reduce anxieties and uncertainties before rumors develop	– Discover & alleviate underlying causes of rumors	– Minimize damage rumors cause
<b>General Strategy</b> (Rumor Theory)	– Open lines of communication – Honesty – Provide complete, accurate info	– Refute rumors with trusted source w/o vested interest – <u>Do</u> comment – Tailor remedy to rumor motive	– Legal actions against sources and/or transmitters
<b>Tactics for Iraq</b>	– Build relationships to establish trust – Most to least effective: personal, community, regional (media) – Significant investment of time, effort	– Identify most damaging rumors – Provide context for refutations – Use trusted mediators if relationships not established	– Challenge media sources to present other side of story – Enlist mediators to repair relationships – Counter negative effects of rumors
<b>Cultural Communication Considerations</b>	– Adapt for high-context, indirect style – Awareness of social norms, saving face	– Facts alone unlikely to diminish rumors – Emotional, personal appeals may be more effective	– Emphasize collective goals, responsibility – Do not disregard the past; be prepared to discuss



## V. CONCLUSION

Soon after US operations in Afghanistan began, and again after forces arrived in Iraq, calls for “better cultural intelligence” were heard throughout military, intelligence and policy circles. Many of these calls came as a direct response to unexpected reactions of local populations and growing insurgencies in both of these countries. In June 2002, Vice Admiral Thomas Wilson, chief of the Defense Intelligence Agency, said more cultural information would allow military commanders to better understand their adversaries in the far-flung corners of the world.<sup>24</sup> Testifying before the House Armed Services Committee in October 2003, Major General Bob Scales, USA (Ret), highlighted the need for better cultural awareness of our military and civilian personnel in policy formulation, warfighting, and stability operations. Representative Ike Skelton (D-MO) echoed those recommendations in a letter to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld,<sup>25</sup> and he just recently called again for better cultural training and skills due to the on-going instability in Iraq.<sup>26</sup> The Pentagon has tried to comply with these calls, teaching Iraq-bound US troops the cultural basics, such as gestures and mannerisms to avoid because they might be interpreted by Iraqis as insulting. But according to Randy Gangle, executive director of the Marine Corps' Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities (CETO), the basics do not equate to “cultural intelligence, understanding, and awareness.”<sup>27</sup> While there is yet to be an agreed upon, formalized definition of cultural intelligence, the intent is to supply commanders and troops with culturally specific information that will contribute to mission accomplishment. In other words, it must be *actionable*. This thesis has proposed a mechanism for supplying actionable cultural intelligence. The analysis of rumors can identify specific concerns and fears of a population that explain behavior and affect local cooperation with US counterinsurgency

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<sup>24</sup> Associated Press, “Intelligence Chief Calls for Cultural Intelligence,” *Macon Telegraph*, 21 Jun 2002.

<sup>25</sup> Skelton, Ike, “Skelton Urges Rumsfeld to Improve Cultural Awareness Training,” Press Release, 23 Oct 2003.

<sup>26</sup> Skelton, Ike and Steve Israel, “‘Softer’ Skills are Needed to Win Hearts and Minds in Post-Combat Iraq,” *Air Force Times*, 2 Aug 2004.

<sup>27</sup> Mullen, Richard, “Marine Expert: Pentagon Still Unready For ‘Small Wars,’” *Defense Today*, 31 Aug 2004.

efforts. If these concerns and fears are addressed, it could have a significant impact on security and stability. Furthermore, rumors can be used to assess foreign public opinion and measure the effectiveness of a hearts and minds campaign. While this thesis has focused on Iraq, the concept of incorporating rumors as an intelligence source is applicable to virtually any country as long as the content analysis and rumor remedies are tailored for the culture in which they occur.

#### **A. SUMMARY**

This thesis proposed the study of rumor as a way to guide and measure effectiveness of the battle for hearts and minds. It reviewed existing rumor theory to identify how rumors function and what we can learn from them. Rumors often serve as a window into the underlying fears, anxieties, and sentiments of a community. By tapping into this abundant source of information, the US could develop a more successful campaign to assess, monitor, and gain the support necessary to defeat insurgents and win the peace. This thesis employed two distinct typologies to analyze over ten months of circulating rumors in Baghdad, Iraq. The motivation typology, adopted from past rumor studies, provided indications of Iraqi opinion and morale. Findings suggested that anxiety and fear are prevalent and unrelenting in Iraq, likely contributing to widespread hostility towards the US-led Coalition. Indications of unrealistic expectations were also evident, potentially contributing to hostility levels as they go unrealized. The subject typology identified overarching themes and concerns of the Iraqi people. These findings suggested that there are specific fears and concerns inhibiting cooperation with US counterinsurgency efforts, most significantly rumored threats against collaborators and their families. Areas the Coalition may not be effectively communicating with Iraqis were also identified, such as the US' long-term intentions in the country and providing realistic expectations of reconstruction efforts; this type of ineffective communication has likely contributed to misperceptions and mistrust. This thesis then examined rumor remedies, or how to prevent and control damaging rumors. Because rumor remedies rely primarily on effective communication skills, American and Arab cultural communication styles were contrasted and integrated into tailored remedies for Iraq. Ultimately, the findings in this thesis could assist Coalition information campaigns by alerting them to existing Iraqi perceptions so they can tailor messages to address significant concerns and

fears. Finally, these findings could be used as a baseline for future studies to assess the effectiveness of rumor remedies and their influence on the battle for hearts and minds.

## **B. POLICY PRESCRIPTIONS**

The following recommendations could facilitate the practical analysis of rumors in Iraq, as well as the implementation of coordinated, effective rumor remedies.

### **1. Institutionalize Rumor Processing**

Public affairs, information operations and psychological operations all require the insight rumors can provide in order to be truly effective in disseminating US intentions and shaping the Iraqi perspective. However, there is no central, hierarchical mechanism to tie these efforts together and to ensure the information gleaned from rumors is acted upon by the appropriate units. Even if rumor remedies are initiated, they could potentially backfire if coordination does not take place and conflicting responses are issued. Therefore, a cell should be established with informed representatives from public affairs, information and psychological operations units, and the open source intelligence teams collecting the rumors. Although there is often hesitancy for public affairs officials to be associated with ‘propaganda’ units for fear of compromising their positions as spokesmen, they play a critical role in shaping Iraqi perceptions and should be included. The cell leader must have some recognized authority in all these units to ensure real cooperation takes place. If established, this cell would be able to determine which rumors should be addressed, ensure remedies are coordinated and complimentary, and share feedback on the effectiveness of different remedy techniques and strategies.

### **2. Centralized Rumor Repository**

The MNF-I/III Corps ACE-OSINT team in Iraq has taken the first important step in collecting and disseminating rumors in the *Baghdad Mosquito*. Rumors are currently examined on a weekly basis, as they are reported. Analyses of rumors trends and underlying concerns are based solely on the institutional knowledge of the individuals assigned to the OSINT team, and when they rotate out of theater, that knowledge goes with them. Aside from hundreds of archived issues of the publication there is no repository for this data that can help make sense of it all. A centralized database of circulating rumors, that tracks when, where, and who reported it (ascriptive identity—not the specific individual), would help fill this gap. The database should employ rumor

typologies to track rumors as they are reported. Typologies could be similar to those used in this thesis; however, the specific needs of commanders and forces on the ground should also be considered in order to highlight specific types of information. For example, a category could track rumors predicting attacks. Subsequent analysis should show how reliable these rumors are—if at all—and possibly provide force protection indicators. Whatever typologies are used, categories may have to be adjusted over time as new concerns emerge and old ones are resolved. Once rumor data is in a centralized database, it could then be manipulated to more easily identify, analyze, and even graphically display predominant themes, trends and other findings. Rumor remedies could also be tracked to monitor effectiveness and ensure message consistency. This centralized database should be accessible throughout the operating area, and provide some capability—perhaps with a bulletin board or other portal function—for geographically separated units to share lessons learned about effective or ineffective rumor remedies, or receive guidance and suggestions for responding to new rumors.

### **3. Increase Deployment Lengths**

Finally, while certainly not a popular suggestion, I propose deployments to Iraq should be extended to a year. The reasons for this are likely applicable to many other positions, but I will only focus on those personnel that are or could be involved in rumor collection, processing, and remedies. First, as I mentioned in the recommendation for a centralized repository, most of the knowledge about what rumors may mean or which ones are common and reoccur resides primarily with the personnel collecting them. Currently, rotation lengths vary in the OSINT cell, with some personnel assigned for a full year, while others deploy for only four months. A database would help, but it still takes times to learn the nuances of the data and to comprehend the worldview of the Iraqis. In four months, personnel are just starting to truly understand the Iraqi mindset as well as their jobs; when they leave there is an “experience vacuum” as a new person attempts to learn the ins and outs of Iraq and repeat the process.<sup>28</sup> One-year deployments would provide more continuity and higher quality rumor analysis. The second reason deployments should be increased is because one of the central elements of rumor remedies is trust, which in Iraq, is built on relationships. Trusted relationships are

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<sup>28</sup> Putnam, Bill. E-mail to the author. 20 Aug 2004.

unlikely to be established in four months. Short deployments may even frustrate Iraqis so they do not attempt to form relationships with Americans, since they know the person will be leaving soon. When discussing the short assignments of government officials in Iraq before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, General Hoar commented, “The lesson of Vietnam was that it was not practical to assign people to these kinds of duties for less than 18 months.” (US Congress 2004) I propose the same concept is true for personnel involved in rumor analysis in Iraq, although one year is likely sufficient.

In conclusion, rumors are another tool that can provide insight into the perceptions, concerns, and fears of a community, and should be utilized. They are free as well as prevalent in Iraq, unlike similar tools such as opinion polls that are costly and can only be conducted intermittently. This is not to say that rumors should replace opinion polls or other tools, but they should be added to the arsenal. Some familiarity and knowledge of the culture is needed to fully understand and alleviate the uncertainty and anxieties rumors convey, but the information gained could significantly contribute to mission accomplishment.

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